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THE CAGE BIRD
& Other Stories

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BY FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

NOVELS

THE KEY OF LIFE
PORTRAIT OF CLARE
SEA HORSES
COLD HARBOUR
WOODSMOKE
PILGRIM'S REST
THE RED KNIGHT
THE BLACK DIAMOND
THE TRAGIC BRIDE
THE YOUNG PHYSICIAN
THE IRON AGE
THE DARK TOWER
DEEP SEA
MY BROTHER JONATHAN
BLACK ROSES
JIM REDLAKE
UNDERGROWTH
(with E. Brett Young)
MR. AND MRS. PENNINGTON
THE HOUSE UNDER THE WATER

POETRY

FIVE DEGREES SOUTH
POEMS: 1916-1918

BELLES LETTRES

MARCHING ON TANGA
ROBERT BRIDGES

■

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

THE CAGE BIRD
& Other Stories



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Shellis's Reef

I

I SHALL never forget that morning, on the dock-side at Birkenhead, when I "signed on" for my first voyage. Late in the afternoon of the day before, a wire had reached me in London. A fellow named Ferris, the *Chusan's* regular surgeon, had crocked up at the last minute with a go of malaria, picked up in Java. Could I travel overnight to Liverpool and join the ship next morning? She was sailing at high water—somewhere round about eight-thirty. Eight pounds a month, and a bonus if I behaved myself. Could I manage it at such short notice?

Could I, indeed! This particular adventure was the one which I'd been promising myself ever since I graduated: a coloured compensation for six drab years of study; but the C.S.N.C.—the Cathay Steam Navigation Company—to give it its full name—had a long waiting list, and the wire took me by surprise. Still, when you're young, surprise gives a salt to life. I had just an hour before the shops shut to collect a scratch set of gear and bundle into a train that landed me in Liverpool after midnight.

I didn't sleep that night. My mind was too hot with fancies. Imagine it: to be young, and (very nearly) heart-free; to be setting out at less than twelve hours' notice for the uttermost East—Korea, Japan, Manila, and home again Heaven knew how or when. The whole night was haunted by sea-sounds: the syrens of great ships nosing their way up the Mersey through the fog. This adventure, I tell you, had a quality as distinct, as ineffable as that of first love—the flavour on a virgin palate of some tropical fruit. If you've been born an islander and a romantic you'll know what I mean. . . .

But the actual beginning of it, next morning, wasn't inspiring. A cold and slimy quay, so thick with fog that you couldn't see the Blue Peter sagging from the *Chusan's* mizzen topmast. The ship herself looked incredibly grimed and shabby—more like a derelict collier than a live merchantman. And the rest of the crew (as I guessed them to be) who shivered round the Board of Trade office like myself, with their gear dumped beside them, resembled the survivors of a shipwreck rather than seamen joining for a new voyage. There were only half a dozen of them; the bulk of the crew were Chinese, picked up in Hong-Kong; but, such as they were, they looked about as unpromising as the ship: an unshaven, surly lot of ruffians with coat collars turned up and mufflers twisted round their raw necks. No doubt one or two—more luck to them!—had been making a night of it; but their appearance, on a morning like that, was a trifle chilling. When you're going

to pig it at close quarters for six months you're critical of your company.

The *Chusan's* bell jerked out eight strokes. It was the first sign of life aboard her. Punctual to the minute a Board of Trade official arrived, a solemn young man in steel-rimmed spectacles. We all slouched in behind him. I was invited to sign my soul away for the duration of the voyage, and did so, gladly. That moment, indeed, had a sacramental flavour. It made me, for the first time in my life, a sailor: an authentic, if temporary, member of the Mercantile Marine.

"Well, we'd better be getting aboard, Doc," said a voice at my elbow. It seemed that the effects of my initiation were not confined to myself. One of those surly, muffled figures was speaking to me in a North-Country accent, as familiarly as if he'd known me all my life. He looked, perhaps, the roughest and most unpromising of the bunch: a thick-set, middle-aged walrus, with an uneven sandy moustache on which the river fog had condensed in dewy globules.

"When I saw you hanging about," he said, "I guessed who you were. Old Ferris, our regular surgeon's picked up a bad bug last voyage in Tanjong Priok. Well, well, the old *Chusan's* not such a bad packet. Teak decks, and less cockroaches than most of 'em. This your first voyage? My name," he went on, "is Blagden. I'm the Chief Officer. If you'll get your gear together I'll show you your cabin. The Old Man's as strict on time as a blooming chronometer. He don't half get rattled if

there's anyone on shore when he comes aboard."

"What's his name?" I enquired.

"The Old Man's? Captain Shellis. D'you mean to say the Medical Super. didn't tell you all about him? Ay, he's what you might call an original, is old Benjie Shellis. Been with this company donkeys' years. This'll be his last voyage. Grand old man, for all that. By gum, we'd better look slippy! Talk of the devil!"

Diving incontinently into an alleyway my friend Mr. Blagden evaded me and left me stranded with my kitbag on the greasy deck. Through the fog on the quay below me I saw a ramshackle four-wheeled cab crawling up. It gave up the ghost at the very foot of the accommodation ladder, and from its straw-strewn interior two figures emerged. The first was that of a gaunt woman, unusually tall and bony, with heavy features and a flaming red face. She wore a jet-trimmed pancake of a hat, perched, like a rook's nest, on the top of her head. Behind her there came a spare little man in a billycock hat, with a face as grey as his mutton-chop whiskers, a high, starched collar, and a navy blue suit that fitted abominably. He looked as little like a sailor as anything that you can imagine. Apart from the Chief Officer's hint, I should never have guessed that these two apparitions were Captain Shellis, the master of the *Chusan* and of my destinies, and his wife.

On shore, at any rate, it was Mrs. Shellis who did the mastering. She ordered the cabman about like a cavalry sergeant-major. The most amazing collection

of baskets, cardboard boxes, brown-paper parcels and packing-cases was dragged out of the cab's interior on to the muddy quay. She counted them over, methodically, with a bony, black-gloved finger. Then, satisfied that the cab was empty, she lifted her veil, took her husband in her arms and kissed him so thoroughly that I was sorry for him. One couldn't associate the idea of kisses with such a dragon. She kissed him, for all the world to see, then patted his back, as though he were a small boy being sent off to school; then, lowering her veil again, climbed into the cab and drove away. He stood looking after her, a curiously formal figure, waving his hand. An enormous black-gloved member waved back from the cab. It wasn't a romantic parting. Indeed, it was grotesque. I didn't guess then how poignantly I was going to remember it.

But that is to anticipate. As soon as he set foot on the gangway Captain Shellis became another man. It was astonishing to see how this insignificant figure, which you might have taken for that of an obscure small shopkeeper, stiffened into authority—almost as if he drew virtue from the grimy deck of his command. The grey, whiskered face, as he came for'ard, took on a peculiar dignity from which even the black billycock couldn't detract. It was set in lines so serious, so genuinely impressive, it was so full of so much sombre preoccupation, that the sense of my own unimportance persuaded me to avoid meeting it, as Blagden had done.

II

I didn't, as a matter of fact, make Captain Shellis's nearer acquaintance for more than three days. The glory of the sea, of which, in a landsman's way I'd been dreaming for half my life, resolved itself during that time into a humiliating state of green prostration occasioned by the sickening staggers of that drunken ship. Not even the ballast of road-rails that we were carrying to Chemulpo for the Korean Railways could keep her steady. I realized bitterly that sailors are born, not made. My friendship with Blagden, the Chief Officer, however, ripened—in spite of the fact that we couldn't exactly see eye to eye on the humorous nature of my own condition. His own prescription for sea-sickness, which was to swallow a hunk of fat corned pork on the end of a string, gave more amusement to him than to me; but the presence of his burly self, blowing in with a windy smile from the reeling bridge, was as good as a tonic.

Blagden was a sailor born if ever there was one. He had the honesty, the charitableness, the wisdom of those who are forced to work out their own salvation in a confined space with all manner of companions. At sea, however much you may dislike a shipmate, you can't get away from him. If you learn nothing else, you learn how to make the best of people. And Blagden

made the best of my seasick self. As for me, I was overcome with admiration for this rough, simple, middle-aged man, compelled to earn his living away from the wife and children that he quite obviously adored. It was from these affections, no doubt, that he drew the almost paternal interest which embraced the whole ship's company from the Chinese stokers to Captain Shellis himself.

The relation of the Master and the Chief Officer—the “mate,” as old Shellis called him—was a peculiar one. On the surface, Blagden behaved toward him with the most meticulous respect, deferring to the older man with the humility of a schoolboy in the presence of his head master, and imposing the same attitude on all the rest of us. Unofficially, as I gathered from the long yarns with which I was regaled during his watch below, Blagden regarded him with a protective, half-humorous affection—as a kind of museum-piece, the only perfect example extant in “steam” of an old-fashioned windjammer captain: an extremely fragile specimen, whom he, as a conscientious curator, must keep carefully dusted and preserved.

As far as externals went (and that, for the moment, was as far as I got), the mate's concern was justified. Old Shellis as I saw him, now that the Atlantic had done its damndest with me and the *Chusan* went wallowing southward with the sunlit downs of Portugal on her port beam, was a perfect miniature representation in waxwork of what a skipper should be. I say

“waxwork” advisedly. There was a curious stiffness and fragility, an unreal perfection in the dapper little old man’s appearance. On a larger scale his leonine head, whose finely-rugged features reminded one of Wagner’s, would have been extraordinarily impressive. Even as it was, the proportions were so perfect that scale seemed a matter of small importance; and the formal precision of his manner (and manners) made one forget that the *Chusan* was, after all, a dirty little tramp of two thousand tons’ burthen. He sat at the head of the shabby saloon table with the dignity of an admiral on his flagship or the master of an Atlantic liner. He commanded—that was the only word—respect. And, by Jove, he got it! More than that, he was loved, and by every one of us. Old Shellis, if he were nothing else, was a great gentleman.

Again and again, as I think of him, the word “fragile” comes into my mind. How old he was exactly nobody knew, though his references to the wild days when Japan was a closed country suggested an incredible antiquity. But my medical eyes saw more than the fragility of age. The waxen pallor of Shellis’s fine face was pathological. Watching him narrowly, as he sat at the head of the table, I had noticed, in his skinny neck, a sinister pulsation of the carotid denoting aortic incompetence, and suggesting that the old man’s hold on life was more precarious than the others imagined. That, and an occasional breathlessness which rarely showed itself—for old Shellis evidently knew his own limita-

tions—warned me that, at any moment, and probably at the most unexpected, my good friend Blagden might find himself in command of the *Chusan*. There was no need, of course, for me to acquaint the Chief Officer with this possibility. If the occasion arose, he was perfectly competent to deal with it. As a matter of fact, his own concern was not for the lesion in Captain Shellis's heart, but for what he described as the bee in the old man's bonnet.

III

This was the insect to which he had made a veiled allusion on our first meeting when he had asked me whether the Medical Superintendent hadn't instructed me on the captain's peculiarity. He hadn't. I had joined the ship at such short notice, with no preparation, in fact, but one short preliminary interview. But since the matter was common knowledge, and, indeed, one of the standing jokes of the C.S.N.C. fleet, Blagden felt it his duty to "put me wise," as he called it.

This, to be concise, was the story of Shellis's Reef. In his youthful peregrinations of the China seas, Heaven knows how many years before our present voyage, old Shellis, then a second-mate in sail, had been wrecked on some uncharted obstacle in the waste of yellow water that lies between the mouth of the Yangtze-kiang and the Korean coast. This disaster had taken place on a

starry night and in a dead calm. The crew of the barque had been forced to leave her sinking, and six of them had suffered horrors quite unimaginable on a speck of an island from which two survivors, of whom Shellis was one, had been picked up ten days later in a state of delirium. This sojourn in hell had left a deep scar—as well it might have done—on the young Shellis's mind. That he even survived it a sane man was something of a miracle. In Blagden's opinion he hadn't. In the ordinary way, he assured me, there wasn't a saner man afloat than the *Chusan's* captain; but on that one point there was clearly a screw loose somewhere.

Before they abandoned ship, Blagden informed me, young Shellis had managed to make a stellar observation. Whatever the barque had hit—and he was convinced that it was a reef—he was able to specify its exact position. As soon as he recovered his health and his senses—or as much as was left of them—Shellis had made a full report to the Admiralty, expecting them to incorporate this important discovery in the next issue of the *China Pilot*. But the Admiralty, as is the way with them, had done nothing of the sort. No doubt they had made a note of Shellis's report. No doubt, Blagden said, when next they sent a survey ship to the Yellow Sea, the officer in charge had investigated the obstruction. But the reef's existence had never been recognized nor referred to, even to this day, on any chart.

"Of course," Blagden told me, "the Old Man took

it rough. The whole blamed show had been so ghastly that he couldn't think of anything else. He'd been through hell—nearly lost his life and his reason, and these official blighters at home treated his report, which, after all, he'd made at great personal risk and for the sake of other people, as if it were just a description of a bad dream. He brooded over it; I fancy he must have made a nuisance of himself, not only to the Admiralty, who could escape from him, but to other people who couldn't. He found it impossible, you see, to get away from it himself. You know what a sailor's life is—particularly if he happens to command a ship. He can't make friends of his officers; it just wouldn't do. His mind turns in on itself. What d'you call it? A vicious circle. Yes. . . . If your mind once gets set on a thing you can't escape from it."

And that was what happened to Shellis, the mate told me. Most sympathetically, mind you. This bluff sailor was delicate, incredibly delicate. For him there was nothing comical in the Old Man's obsession. It was just a misfortune, like having a squint or bow-legs. Only this spiritual deformity, unfortunately, went deeper. "That blessed reef," he said, "has come to be the most important thing in old Shellis's life. He's always waiting for some ship or other to get piled up on it. That's why, when newspapers come aboard, the first thing he'll turn to is the Lloyd's Casualty Reports. I've watched him; I know. I can almost bet he wouldn't mind if something of that kind *did* happen. It's a matter in

which ordinary humanity doesn't count, and he'd give his life to be able to say: 'I told you so!'—though there isn't a sweeter, gentler old cuss in the company. I've been shipmates with most of 'em, and know what I'm talking about."

"It seems," I suggested, "to be what we call an *idée fixe*."

"I'll take your word for that, Doc," said Blagden grimly. "It's a damned nuisance, anyway. It puts you in an awkward hole. The thing has become a joke all over the East. If you mention the Old Man's name in any club between Penang and Yokohama, you're certain to raise a laugh. He don't realize it, poor old devil, and that makes me mad. Why? Because I'm fond of him; because I damn well respect him. And the devil of it is, the older he gets the more sure he is of it. That blessed speck in the Yellow Sea's the only important thing in navigation."

"Then you don't believe," I asked, "that this reef has any existence?"

"Ask me another," the Mate replied gloomily. "In those shallow waters it's difficult to say. Of course, it's quite possible that there was a reef fifty years ago. It's all on the edge of the Japanese volcanic area. Queer things are always happening thereabouts. An island pops up and goes down again every other day. But the Naval Surveys are generally pretty reliable. If the Navy says there's nothing there, I'm prepared to believe them, and so are the owners, which is more to the point.

If I get piled up"—he touched wood—"on something that they say isn't there, it's their funeral, not mine . . . in a manner of speaking," he added, realizing, just too late, whose the funeral *would* be.

"Apparently it was pretty nearly old Shellis's."

"Well, well, I don't know. The poor chap was off his rocker when they rescued him. I'm not prepared to say that he didn't dream it, though, if he did, he's never woken up since. Not that I object to that. It doesn't hurt anybody. Only . . ." He paused. "Well, this is his last voyage. The Company's decided that it's time for him to retire. They're anxious to push on some of the younger men. As a matter of fact—in strictest confidence, mind you—I've been promised the command of this ship as soon as he goes. I'm anxious to make things smooth for the Old Man, to give him a good finish, anyway. That's why I'm taking you into my confidence, Doc. He isn't himself. There's something decidedly queer about his manner. Anyone who didn't know him as well as I do might not notice it. I can't even describe to you exactly what it is. I have a feeling . . ." He dried up suddenly.

"You've any amount of feelings, Blagden," I told him. "As a matter of fact, you're full of sensibility."

His eyes quizzed me, uncertain if this were a compliment. "You see," he went on, "there's one other point. This is the first voyage that the Old Man's been sent up through the Yellow Sea since the time he was wrecked there. As soon as we leave Shanghai for

Chemulpo we shall be getting near it—the place, I mean, where he imagines his reef to be. He may be all right; but he may . . .” Blagden shook his head solemnly. “In any case,” he said, “we’ve all got to pull together. I’ve told you all this because it may be your job, as a doctor, as much as mine. As far as his health goes, I suppose you’ve not noticed anything?” he asked anxiously.

I had, as I’ve already remarked; but there seemed no reason why I should add to Blagden’s benevolent anxieties. “He isn’t, of course, a young man,” was all that I gave him.

“Well, sooner or later,” said Blagden, “he’s certain to tell you about his reef. Now that you’re forewarned you’ll know just how to deal with it, won’t you?”

IV

I thanked him. For several weeks I heard nothing more about poor old Shellis’s reef, and the captain himself showed no signs of wishing to talk of it. Through all that period my mind was absorbed, excited and entranced by a series of visions that remain with me to this day. Gibraltar, grey and monstrous against the dawn; the snows of Crete, flamingo-hued in the fire of sunset; Port Said, where first the smell of the East begins; pink mountains of Sinai in their lunar desolation; Colombo, sweltering under a vertical sun. By

this time the *Chusan*, that blistered tramp whose sordidness so depressed me at Birkenhead, had become a second home, a familiar world, whose limits I knew intimately from the fo'c's'le, where the Chinese crew smoked and gambled, to the engine-room whence emanated the gigantic throbbing that made a background to my dreams. She was a kind of magic carpet, making me free of all the marvels which my comrades took so phlegmatically. Not one of them felt romantic about the sea. The *Chusan* herself was no more to them than an office or a workshop proceeding on her appointed course at a miserable ten knots. The ports at which we touched meant letters from home, fresh vegetables, or the passing enjoyment of exotic female society. They were all, in their different ways, good fellows, and humoured my romanticism, with the result that by the time we made Penang there wasn't one of them with whom I wasn't on terms of an easy intimacy.

Not one, I should have said, except Captain Shellis. Not that he failed toward me in his habitual courtesy. He had better manners than any duke among my limited acquaintance. But the doctor, as I had yet to learn, holds a peculiar position in a ship's company. Among these professionals he is counted an amateur; though one of the crew he is never exactly a sailor; though subject to the master's discipline, he is, in his own undisputed province, a specialist. He belongs, in short, to an alien, a shore-side world. Add to this, in

my own case, my damnable youthfulness in comparison with the rest of them, and with Captain Shellis in particular. Our lives were so separated both by years and by the quality of our experience that I could hardly expect him to grant me an intimacy which he denied to others. I think of him, in those days, as a remote figure—a square-shouldered silhouette posed motionless on the bridge against a background of burning blue sky.

The fact remained that the doctor was the only member of the ship's company with whom the captain could be intimate without loss of discipline. The remoteness, the mystery of this dignified little man, interested me. I wanted so much to be part of the ship's life, to forgo my privilege—such as it was—that his formal air disappointed me. I felt, indeed, that I had achieved a stupendous honour when, at Penang, old Shellis invited me to go ashore with him.

A more delightful host it would be impossible to imagine. Although the combination of European Sunday clothes and a white sun-helmet detracted from the dignity which he had assumed with his uniform, I felt flattered by his company. He hadn't frequented that part of the East through forty odd years for nothing. Wherever our *ricksha* went strange salutations awaited him. Grave Chinese merchants bowed to him from their doorsteps; Eurasian clerks raised their hats; even the *ricksha* coolies recognised him. I felt I was in the company of a personage—as indeed I was.

He did the honours magnificently: lunched me at the club on such curry as I had never tasted, then proposed, for our afternoon, a drive up into the hills. The memory of that excursion stays with me vividly: the soft, palm-shadowed road; the suburban homes of wealthy Chinese; a flat field, scattered with cloths newly dyed with indigo spread out to dry; the smile of a lazy bullock-wagon driver, whose teeth were stained with betel-nut to the colour of bright blood; and, permeating all, the hot and spicy air of the Malay Peninsula, so charged with moisture that my scalp pricked beneath the new-bought *topee*. We drove, for the most part, in silence, dismounting finally beneath the shade of huge and unfamiliar trees, where, by the side of a small, white Hindu temple, the old man burst into unexpected confidence.

Of course I knew what to expect. He told me the story of his reef. Very much as Blagden had told it. Shyly, at first, as though he felt I was too young to be interested, or, perhaps, that I was listening from the point of view of a mental specialist. Well, if that old man were mad, he certainly had a good excuse for his insanity. He spoke, as usual, with a simple, courtly precision; but it was his very directness that made that old horror live with a vividness that had never appeared in Blagden's version. If I could have written it down, word for word, as he told it, you would have given me credit for an imaginative masterpiece. I can't, alas! All that remains with me now is the incom-

municable atmosphere of an actual, intense, lonely terror—so present and compelling that it swept all consciousness of my real surroundings, the whitewashed temple and the high festoons of exotic foliage, out of my mind. “At that point,” Shellis was saying, “I felt that the quartermaster and I were looking at each other almost greedily. We weren’t civilized human beings any longer—just hungry cannibals. I determined that if anybody were going to be killed and eaten I would rather it was I.”

He told me these ghastly details with a detached and dreamy coldness. It was only when he passed from them to his dealings with the Admiralty and the contemptuous rejection of his report that his fiery, inward agitation showed itself. As he spoke, his lips trembled; his pallor increased; the pulsation of his carotids grew more violent; he drew his breath in quick and hungry gasps. If my diagnosis were correct, this emotion was dangerous. Could I control it, I wondered, without alarming him? With a sigh that was like a shudder he continued more calmly:

“All this, however, is ancient history,” he said. “Until recently I’ve been quite resigned—yes, completely resigned. The only person with whom I’ve discussed the matter of late has been my dear wife.” I had a momentary vision of the bony, red-faced dragon who had put him aboard so carefully at Birkenhead. “But lately,” he went on, “I’ve been forced to dwell on it more than is good for me. It seems curious that

on this, my last voyage—for the Company wish me to retire—I should be sent, in the ordinary course of my calling, to the very spot where I was wrecked fifty years ago. The Company is very strict in matters of navigation. The course that we're expected to take from Woosung to Chemulpo is directly in the line of the reef which I know to exist. There's no possible margin of error in my observations. I could cover that spot on the chart with the point of a needle. It's at Latitude 36' 12" north by 125' 23" east. Now my ticket's as clean as that of any master in the Mercantile Marine. I've never had the least mishap in all my sea-going life. Supposing, on this very last voyage, I lost my ship!

"Let's look at both sides," he went on, with renewed agitation. "I'm a servant of the Company, under orders. If I obey those orders, I stand to lose the Company's ship. Not only do I do that: I spoil my career at its end. On the other hand"—he smiled grimly—"the loss of my ship will serve as a warning to others. It may possibly save a large number of lives. And if it does nothing else"—he spoke with a passionate malignancy—"it may give the Admiralty a necessary lesson in manners!"

As he spoke, the urgency of his feeling compelled him to clutch at my arm. Then the fingers that caught me relaxed. He swayed away from me; fell back and rolled over on the slope in a pitiful heap. At that moment I think I must have gone as white as old

Shellis. I saw myself running for help and carting a dead man back to the ship. For a second it almost looked as if he had gone. Then, with a disconcerting suddenness he opened his eyes. They were dazed and colourless.

"A bit of a turn," he whispered. "I got over-excited."

"For God's sake keep quiet now. Don't move, don't think; try to put this business out of your mind!" I implored him.

He smiled weakly. "You don't know what you're saying, Doctor. Put it out of my mind? Why, every minute it's coming nearer and nearer!"

I made him lean on my arm as I helped him back to the *gharri*. In the town and on the *sampan* that took us to the ship he refused my aid; he was all the captain again, resenting my interference.

That evening, however, I insisted, in my professional capacity, on examining him. I found rather more than I'd already guessed: a grave, long-standing lesion of the aortic valves. Perhaps it was the lowered resistance and strain of his exposure on that Chinese islet that had allowed infective bacteria to invade that vital tissue. In any case, his hold on life was even more precarious than I had imagined. He must have known it, subconsciously; and this knowledge explained the precision and composure with which he conducted his life. It explained also the sedulous care with which Mrs. Shellis had consigned his fragile old body to the

Chusan at Birkenhead. Of one thing, at least, I had been warned clearly. I now knew that the shock of any unusual emotion might put an end to him. As a matter of plain duty I confided these fears to Blagden.

"Well, what can we *do* about it?" he asked pertinently.

Yes. What could we *do*? There was, actually, nothing to be done. We could do nothing but wait. And every minute, as old Shellis had said, it was coming nearer. . . .

v

We left Shanghai on the day of the Chinese New Year. I remember it well, for our Chinese crew took the opportunity of going mad. The *comprador* had sent them aboard a horrible piglet covered with a sort of obscene yellow glaze. The thing filled me with nausea, for, as we steamed up to the bar at Woosung, I saw other live pigs snouting among the shallow graves that lined the banks of the Shanghai river, suggesting, in the crew's debauch, a kind of cannibalism at second hand. That evening the fo'c's'le grew noisy with the detonations of crackers and fireworks. A smell of burning joss-stick pervaded the ship—that and the sour fumes of opium: the bos'n and two quarter-masters already lay drugged in their bunks.

Since the day of his collapse at Penang old Shellis appeared to have recovered his nerve completely. Not

only did he discourage any further intimacy on my part, he actually seemed to avoid me. His composure was now so complete as to seem unnatural, though, apparently, it was so well affected as to take in the ingenuous Blagden.

"You must have put the fear of God into the Old Man," he said. "Or else he must have got an almighty fright that afternoon. Whatever it was, I'm not complaining. The quieter he keeps the better it is for all of us."

Off the mouth of the Yangtze we ran into patches of fog that kept the Old Man pretty thoroughly glued to the bridge. The waters of the Archipelago were stiff with fishing-boats, and there was always a risk in those days, when the Japs were beginning to expand their coastal carrying-trade, that some old tub bought cheap in Europe and worth twopence-halfpenny might commit *hara-kiri* by crashing across your bows in their light-hearted vigorous way. The delay and anxiety of those forty-eight hours told on everybody. Old Shellis was scarcely ever visible; took all his meals on the bridge, and led poor Blagden, from what one heard, a hell of a life.

On the third morning out the fog had vanished completely. The sun came up clear over a calm glitter of sea—not the blue of profound depths like that from which flying fish had spurted farther south, but a silken, sheeny surface, between ochre and silver, which showed that even here the influence of yellow rivers was show-

ing itself like the mud of the Severn that tinges the Bristol Channel. I realized then why they call it the Yellow Sea. But the sparkle of sunshine through cold, dry air, and the fact that the *Chusan* had stopped crawling and bellowing and had resumed her normal—if unimpressive—speed, was enough to lift the load from our spirits. An unshaven but cheerful Blagden made up for lost time and scamped meals at the breakfast-table.

"Well, thank Heaven that's over!" he congratulated himself as he put away crisped corned pork.

"What about the other business?" I reminded him. "We must be getting nearer. Is the Old Man shaping all right?"

"O God, Doc, don't speak of it," he replied. "He doesn't look too bad. What he and I want just now is a bellyful of sleep. The 'third' will keep my watch."

That morning the sounds which penetrated the bulkhead that separated our cabins made it clear that Blagden was getting it. Old Shellis, I imagined, was similarly engaged. He didn't turn up for tiffin; but there was nothing unusual in that. In the dog-watch, however, when Blagden and I sat together smoking and enjoying the late afternoon sun, the Captain's Chinese servant arrived with a message. Blagden and the Chief Engineer were wanted at once in the Old Man's cabin. "More trouble!" said Blagden gloomily, knocking out his pipe.

When, half an hour later, he returned, there was

no more doubt of it. I had never seen such an expression of puzzled discomfort before on his rugged, half-humorous face. The smile with which I greeted him went unanswered. "Look here, Doc, I want a word with you," he said.

He pulled me up the alleyway and into his cabin; then locked the door mysteriously and sat down on the locker with a heavy sigh. He threw up his hands and let them fall in a gesture of despair.

"Well, this has put the lid on it," he said. "He's mad, cracked, balmy! Gone clean off his chump!"

"What the devil do you mean?" I said. Of course I knew what he meant.

"We might have guessed it," he said. "We might have guessed it."

Then, roughly, disjointedly, he began to give me some sort of account of his interview with Shellis. "Take a seat, Mr. Blagden. Take a seat, Mr. Twiss," he'd begun. First of all he'd wanted them to witness his signature to some document—a will, a statement, God knew what it was. Then he had solemnly advised them to make their own wills. To-morrow, at this time, he'd said, they would all be in the hands of God. To-morrow, at this time—he pulled out a chart and showed them the spot marked with a cross of red ink—the *Chusan* would run aground. And that, he said, was why he had sent for them; to make the fullest possible precaution to meet the disaster. By midday to-morrow the *Chusan's* boats must be swung out and fully pro-

visioned. The Chief Officer would issue life-belts all round; a boat-drill would be ordered, to see that every member of the crew knew his proper station and that the gear was in order. At the same time the Chief Engineer would see that speed was reduced, so that the impact, when it came, might be as small as possible. He had the whole job cut and dried from A to Z.

"But surely," I said, "you two didn't take it all lying down? Didn't you try to make him see sense? Surely you could have suggested . . ."

"Suggested? You might as well have made suggestions to a stone statue! He's master of this ship, and by gad, he made us feel it!"

That was the impression that came through to me out of Blagden's confused distress: the two sane men, bewildered, protesting, yet almost reduced to silence by Shellis's stony, adamant composure. They could no more shift that reef from his mind than if it had stood there actually in ponderable stone. However whirling mad his brain may have been, he gave his fantastic orders with a composure that transcended sanity.

"But didn't you . . . ?" I protested.

"God damn you! Let me tell you," said Blagden irritably. "*Didn't* we? Of course we did! Have you ever argued with a madman? I told him that all these preparations would be quite unnecessary if he'd change his course. Change course! Didn't I know that the Company settled that, and that he, as a servant of the Company, was forced to follow the directions he'd been

given before we left Liverpool? If he considered the ship was in danger, I suggested. But not a bit of it! The Marine Superintendent, who'd laid down the course, knew all about his objections before we sailed. The Company dictated the most economical course, and he must follow it. He knew what his duty was, thank you, far better than I did! I got put in my place all right as soon as I spoke. And, I tell you what, Doc, I believe the old madman's as pleased as Punch. If the ship gets piled up and he's taken every possible precaution, he'll have the laugh of every Johnny that's been sniggering at him for the last forty years, ourselves included. I tell you it's obstinacy and pride that's under his madness. But mad he is, unless it's us that's balmy!"

"But didn't the Chief . . ." I began.

"The Chief? Of course he did. He said that reducing speed like that was uneconomical. That the Company would lose far less money, if that was the trouble, if he changed course. Which was perfectly reasonable, mind you. *Reason?* If it comes to reason. . . ."

"But, after all," I consoled him, "this reef of his doesn't exist."

"No. It doesn't exist. I'll be damned if the blamed thing exists."

"Then, after all. . . . By this time to-morrow, my dear chap, the whole thing will be over, and nobody any the worse."

Blagden shook his head. "Supposing his reef *does* exist?"

"Why, a moment ago you swore that it *didn't*!"

"I know. *And* it doesn't. But *if*, my dear Doc. . . . Oh, I'm damned if I know what I'm saying. If you saw him yourself, so collected, so reasonable, so almighty scrupulous—by gad, I believe it would shake your faith in the spelling of your own name." He paused. "Doc, I want to know something. Would you be prepared to certify that the Old Man's off his rocker?"

I shook my head. "No. You can't give a certificate on hearsay."

"That's just what I thought. You know, if you could, I'd take the responsibility in my own hands and lock him in his cabin myself."

"I can give you a certificate," I said, "to say that if you did that you'd kill him. I've listened to his heart, and I know. If you and the Chief had argued and got him worked up, I wouldn't even have been sure of the consequences this afternoon. I can tell you, with him it's a matter of touch and go."

"If it's not like my blooming luck," Blagden muttered miserably, "to be landed at my time of life with a cracked skipper! And the devil of it is, Doc, I love the old blighter. That's straight! Even now, when he's mad as a hatter, there's something splendid about him. '*Take a seat, Mr. Blagden. . . . Take a seat, Mr. Twiss.*' Like royalty!"

"Well, if you want to get him home alive, for God's sake humour him."

"Humour him, yes," he repeated bitterly, "and make damn fools of the lot of us. Well, well, I suppose you're right."

VI

Blagden lurched out of the cabin and went to pursue his consultations with the Chief Engineer. He hadn't, I gathered, taken any of the other officers into his confidence. He wanted, I imagine, to protect old Shellis from any unnecessary ridicule—a fine fellow, old Blagden. Yet not only the junior officers, but the Chinese crew must have been mystified by the proceedings of next morning. The boat-drill was properly held; the boats were swung out on their davits and lowered; their provisions and water duly checked. To those who were not in the secret these precautions must have seemed fantastic on a dead-calm sea, with a steady glass and a clear sky. The officers took it as one of the bad jokes which the caprice of old-fashioned superiors imposes without rhyme or reason. The crew, on the other hand, as Blagden whispered to me anxiously, became noticeably restless. Chinamen are creatures of routine and habit, admirably efficient within the bounds of these, but inclined to be apprehensive of any departure from them. They hung in small groups on the foredeck, talking in gutturals, gesticulating. The un-

easiness centred in Blagden's mind showed itself in his puzzled, preoccupied eyes, and began to pervade the ship from poop to fo'c's'le. It was increased, as you can imagine, when, as soon as the high sun had been "taken," old Shellis, on the bridge, rang down "half-speed" to the engine-room.

The only person on the *Chusan* who showed no symptoms of disquietude was the Captain himself. His appearance, as he entered the saloon and took his place at the head of the table, was positively startling. To begin with, he was dressed as though he anticipated entertaining royalty. His brand-new uniform, his shining linen, his black-satin tie, would have shamed an admiral in their correctness. Even his grey whiskers were carefully trimmed and brushed; and his face—that face whose miniature nobility and fine ruggedness had always impressed me—was more coldly composed in its marble perfection than ever before. He spoke little, mainly to me, but with—if that were possible—an exaggeration of the formal courtesy which he always employed. A perfect museum specimen; a statue (as Blagden had suggested)—but a statue of the very best period and in faultless preservation.

All through that midday meal no mention was made of the matter that, in various degrees of enlightenment, obsessed all our minds. When tiffin was finished, we departed severally to our leisure or duty; Captain Shellis, no doubt, to his accustomed *siesta*; the officer of the watch to the bridge from which he had been re-

lieved. I myself lay in my bunk, pretending to read; for, in spite of the sunshine, the air on deck was shrewd.

As eight bells sounded another sound startled my ears: the grating of the engine-room telegraph, the alarm of the bell that accompanied it. Simultaneously the rhythm of the engines' pulsations changed. Somebody on the bridge had ordered a change from "half speed" to "slow." Blagden hurriedly poked his head inside my cabin.

"I can't stand this any longer," he said, "I'm for the bridge."

I turned out on deck myself. I couldn't stand it either. Obstinate, in spite of all my convictions to the contrary, the shadow of approaching disaster loomed over me. Above, on the bridge, whose ladder Blagden was rapidly climbing, I saw the motionless square-shouldered silhouette of Captain Shellis's back, standing out like a statue against the pale, peerless sky.

That scene I shall never forget. The absolute silence—for the *Chusan's* submerged propeller was now turning over so languidly that the ship gave no vibration but an occasional shudder. The vast, encircling sea was as still as a lake, grey-ochreous, slumbering, flawless, like tarnished brass. Not a sail, not a smoke-stack in sight: one vast, smooth solitude. On board the ship herself not a sound was to be heard. The awful entrancedness of the moment compelled everything, animate and inanimate, to silence. Even the Chinamen,

for'ard, clustered at the side, staring hypnotically into the lucent depths that we traversed with such slow, predestinate certainty.

That "moment," I say. Yet such moments have no relation to time; and this one must have lasted, I think, a full half-hour. It might have spun itself out into eternity for all that I knew or cared. Through the strange calm of this hallucination we were carried on, and on, and on. It was with the dazed consciousness of a medium emerging from a hypnotic trance that I was startled by a strained voice calling me. "Doctor . . . doctor! Come quickly, for God's sake!"

I turned to see the face of Blagden, white and agonized, summoning me to the bridge. The statuesque silhouette of old Shellis, which had commanded it, was no longer visible.

How I tumbled up that ladder I have no idea. Five seconds later, somehow or other, I found myself kneeling beside the crumpled waxen effigy that once had been Captain Shellis. He had fallen, silently, where he stood, his chronometer in his hand, as the *Chusan* stole forward, solemnly, over the reef which had existed only in that tragic, pitiful brain, and now existed no longer—not even there.

Poor Blagden stared down at me helplessly; there were tears in his eyes. I shook my head mutely in answer to his mute enquiry. The ship's bell beat one, with a sudden, impatient clangour. It had, in my ears, a shuddering, sinister sound. A passing bell. . . .

Well, well, we must all die some day. And I was young—oh, quite incredibly young!

Then, in the suspended silence, another bell shrilled urgently. Blagden had stepped to the telegraph and taken over command.

"Half speed," I heard. Then, again, *"Full speed ahead."* The ship gave an answering shudder; the bow-wave whispered. Obediently, callously, as though she had merely paused on her way out of momentary, conventional respect for the passing of a brave soul, the *Chusan* ploughed forward under this new guidance. Just so, I thought, the travelling world moves on. We are none of us essential, I thought—not one of us, not even Blagden. . . .

A Busman's Holiday

IF there was one thing that Doctor Malcolm detested and dreaded more than another it was a busman's holiday—in other words, the intrusion of medicine, that science to which his name had added so much lustre, into those precious weeks when sea-trout were on the run.

When a celebrated lawyer or stockbroker goes away for a holiday and the man who is sitting next to him in the train reads his name on his baggage, edges up to him, slips gradually into polite conversation, then drops in a casual question about some hypothetical case of law or the future of International Nickels or General Motors, that lawyer or stockbroker is within his rights if he changes his seat or turns the subject in the direction of golf, cocktails or fishing-tackle.

Neither litigation nor speculation is a matter of life and death; neither the lawyer nor the stockbroker has a duty towards humanity. But a doctor has. Hence the nobility and some of the prime disadvantages of his profession. That was one of the reasons why Henry Malcolm had chosen this remote retreat, the "Forest Arms" at Felindre, on the Welsh border, for his summer holiday. And that was why he felt an acute

and justifiable annoyance when, just as he was pulling on his waders after breakfast, the landlord announced a lady to see him.

"Miss Morgan of 'Bryntyrion,' " he said. "She says that she knows you, sir."

"Miss Morgan? I don't remember anyone of that name. What does she want?"

"She wants to see you, sir. She didn't say why."

"Well, show her in, Jones," said Henry Malcolm resignedly. "No peace for the wicked!"

He pulled off his waders and put on his shoes again. Miss Morgan. . . . It was difficult for a physician with an extensive practice to remember the name of everyone who had consulted him. The remoteness of the "Forest Arms" had its disadvantages; in tiny places of this kind every stranger was conspicuous. The fact that he had been run to earth like this, within a few days of his arrival, might be taken as a compliment to his celebrity as a neurologist—but that was small consolation for the loss of a morning's sport.

"Miss Morgan," the landlord announced.

Miss Morgan entered. She came in with a nervous smile, an odd little woman of fifty or thereabouts, dressed primly, severely, in a fashion of twenty years since. In her face, in her smile, there was something vaguely familiar to Malcolm, half recalling a memory too remote to be fixed. When she spoke, her speech was, quite obviously, that of a lady.

"I'm afraid you don't remember me, doctor," she

said. "It's hardly to be expected. Thirty years. . . . You were only a boy when last I saw you. But my sister Agatha and I have followed your wonderful career with the greatest interest and pride, and when I heard, last night, that you were staying in the village"—tears welled into her eyes—"it seemed like an act of Providence. Ah, I'm afraid you've forgotten."

Miss Morgan? Miss Agatha Morgan? And thirty years ago? At last he had it! Two old maids, the Miss Morgans! Of course, he remembered perfectly! They lived in a tiny house, as neat as a bird's nest, at the corner of the street where Malcolm had spent his childhood. Their father was a retired colonel, a Crimean veteran, who went stumping past the schoolroom window every afternoon on his constitutional—a precise, grey-whiskered figure with an Indian cheroot in his teeth.

He remembered, above all, the smell of the Miss Morgans' sitting-room, a chamber as small and orderly as a ship's cabin. It was a composite odour of furniture-polish, pot-pourri, and cigar-smoke, enveloping a confused and exotic collection of furniture: a spinet, tortured carvings of ebony, Benares brass. He remembered the red and gold of a Crown Derby tea-set, the richness of Miss Agatha's fruit cake, the flavour of the guava-jelly which the Colonel imported from Jamaica and which the Miss Morgans insisted on calling not "jam" but "preserve," and, even more awe-inspiring, their father's Crimean sword, which hung, in

a place of honour, above the mantelpiece. Thirty years. . . .

"Why, of course I remember," he said. "You must be Miss Susan."

She flushed, almost prettily. "How clever of you to remember my name!"

"But what are you doing here, in Felindre?" he asked. "You must tell me all about it. And how is Miss Agatha?"

"She isn't Miss Agatha any longer; she's married—her name's Mrs. Peters. And she's not very well. That's why I have taken this . . . liberty."

"Liberty indeed!" He encouraged her. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Since I've settled in Harley Street, I rarely see old friends. I should never have forgiven you if you hadn't looked me up. I shall want to know everything that's happened since last I saw you."

She sat down nervously. "It's a very long story," she said. "If it weren't that your dear mother had been so kind to us in the old days I should almost hesitate . . ."

He shook his head smilingly; the poor little withered thing was pathetic. "I can see you're in trouble," he said. "Tell me all about it. First of all, how on earth did you get here?"

She smiled, with a wan, appealing gratitude. "Perhaps," she said, "I had better begin at the beginning." She straightened her back and composed her thin hands

on her lap, but Malcolm could see, by the nervous twining of her fingers, that her mind was agitated.

"About fifteen years ago," she began, "long after you had gone to London, dear father died. He was a wonderful man, a true soldier and gentleman, and the best of fathers. We had always lived modestly, well within our income, as everybody should; but when father died, you see, his pension died with him, and Agatha and I were left in very reduced circumstances. If we hadn't been used to careful living I really don't know how we should have got on. But Agatha, of course, was a marvellous housekeeper—the very soul of thrift—so we managed to keep up appearances and go on living in accordance with dear father's station. It wasn't easy, though!" She shook her head slowly.

Malcolm could see what that meant; the little room, cosy no longer; the economies of fuel in winter; the diet, which verged on starvation, of bread and margarine; the makeshift dressmaking. How many spinsters of this kind were prepared to pay this price for their faded gentility!

"However," she went on cheerfully, "we managed to pull through. Of course, from time to time we had to sell little bits of furniture. Some of the most lovely things that father had brought from India fetched next to nothing. It was a crying shame that we had to part with them; but what could we do? If I had had my own way I should have tried to get a post as a lady's companion or governess; but Agatha would never con-

sent to it. 'We may be poor, Susan,' she said, 'but we're proud. Nobody in our family has ever done a thing like that. I think father would turn in his grave,' she said, 'if we ever forgot that we are gentlewomen.' So there it was! Of course Agatha is much more strong-minded than I am. And, as I've said, we *did* manage to pull through, hard though it was, until Agatha came into the property."

"The property?" Malcolm repeated. "Come, that sounds better!" He felt a considerable relief to know that this harrowing tale of hardships would not be prolonged.

"Yes, it was most fortunate in a way," Miss Susan continued demurely, "and quite unexpected. You see," she explained, "our family is a very old one; the Morgans have been squires of Felindre for hundreds of years. When you go to church on Sunday you'll see all our ancestors' monuments."

"Shall I?" Malcolm thought grimly. "Not if I know it! I'm on a holiday!"

"'Bryntyrion,' the family seat," Miss Susan went on, "had gone to dear father's cousin, Howell Morgan. He was very proud of it; and so, when he died, he left it to Agatha, who was his eldest living relative. Quite properly, too. It would have been dreadful to think of it going out of the family."

"Of course, it all came as a wonderful surprise to us. I'm afraid, if I had my own way—I mean, if it had been left to me—I should have wanted to sell it and settle

down in some nice neighbourhood where father's service reputation was known. But Agatha is extremely determined and has a high sense of duty. She said we were bound, out of respect for dear father's memory, to keep up the family tradition and go and live there, even though it *was* so dreadfully out of the way."

"The property is near here?"

"Just three miles from Felindre. Quite alone in the country, and over ten miles from a railway station. Please don't misunderstand me—the property is not very valuable. Cousin Howell had sold the greater part of the estate. Apart from the house there were only a couple of farms, which were let, at the time when Agatha inherited, to tenants who run sheep on them. My sister, who is terribly courageous, would like to have taken them over and set up farming herself. But really, you know, we had lived all our lives in town, and hadn't the necessary experience; besides which, the payment of the death-duties and the expense of moving into Wales left us with very little capital to spare for an adventure of that kind. Our lawyer, very wisely I think, dissuaded Agatha from embarking on it, but nothing and nobody could persuade her that it wasn't our duty to live at 'Bryntyrion.' "

"So you came there, all alone?" Malcolm asked. The hues of romantic prosperity were already beginning to fade from the picture.

"Well, no. Not exactly alone," said Miss Susan nervously. She threw an anxious glance behind her,

as though she suspected that somebody was listening, then continued in a voice that was almost lowered to a whisper:

"Not exactly alone," she repeated. "You see, it was like this. Our lawyer, who was the soul of wisdom and kindness and consideration—I cannot blame *him*—our lawyer impressed upon us most strongly the necessity of *not* being alone. At first Agatha laughed at him—she's a typical soldier's daughter, very different from me, I'm afraid—but eventually even she was forced to admit that he was right. 'You can't go out living in the wilds of Wales,' he told her, 'unless you have a capable man in the house.' The mere mention of a man was enough to make Agatha obstinate. Apart from one rather unfortunate love-affair, nearly forty years ago, Agatha had never had anything to do with men. She despised them, in fact, and was almost scornful whenever I made any gentlemen friends; she said that dear father's society was surely enough for us."

"How jealous these old maids are!" Malcolm thought, while Miss Susan continued:

"At first she refused point blank to entertain the idea. She despised me, you know, for my lack of self-reliance; but really the idea of living right out in the country like that got so much on my nerves that I'm afraid I was guilty of playing a trick on her. I told her that I was sure it would be more in keeping with the family dignity if we had a butler—not a *real* butler, of course, but a man of all work—the kind of man who

was used to good service, who could open the door and take messages when our new neighbours called."

"I think that was very wise of you and entirely reasonable," Malcolm agreed.

"Yes, in principle I'm sure I was right. Of course I never dreamed. . . ." She shook her head sadly. "I suggested that our lawyer should find a suitable man," she went on, "but Agatha would not be beholden to anybody. She said that she herself was a sufficiently good judge. So she put an advertisement in the paper and interviewed all the applicants personally. Mr. Peters was the last of the lot. From the moment when he entered the room I could see that Agatha had made up her mind. She engaged him at once.

"And really, I must confess," Miss Susan admitted, "I completely agreed with her choice. To begin with, Peters was an extremely handsome man—the kind of figure who would lend dignity to any house. You would have said at once that he was a man who knew his place. We liked the way he said 'Madam' whenever he addressed us, and stood with his feet together. In spite of his perfect manners there was nothing servile about him. As Agatha said at the time, it almost seemed as though he must have gentle blood in his veins. So different, in every way, from the servant type!

"Indeed, though he had been a butler once, Peters had not been in service for years. That was why he didn't bring any references with him. He had been keeping a bicycle-shop ever since the war. It seemed

just like fate when he told us he had served in father's old regiment. He was wearing cycling stockings on the day when he came to apply for the post, and really, as Agatha said—his limbs were most shapely! We felt sorry for him, too: he had lately lost his wife. He said he'd been born in the country and was handy with his fingers. He could knock up a hen-coop or anything like that, you know; and it quite touched our hearts when he suggested bringing his fowls along with him to 'Bryntyrion.' There's nothing like having a hobby, Agatha said; and it would be such a change to have new-laid eggs for breakfast!"

Miss Susan sighed. Once more the tears came into her eyes. She dabbed them with her handkerchief.

"So I gather," said Malcolm encouragingly, "that this man Peters wasn't exactly a success?"

Miss Susan shook her head. "I must try," she said, "not to do him any injustice. In a sense, you see, I was responsible for him coming to us, although it was actually Agatha who chose him. At first, I must say, I thought he was marvellous. To begin with, even for such a fine man, he's exceptionally strong. All the work of moving the furniture—he made it seem just like child's play. Then again, having been brought up in the country, he knew far more than we did about farming and that sort of thing. And it was a relief, I can't deny it, to hear him whistling and singing about the place, even though the words he sang were sometimes excessively

vulgar. He knew just how a house should be run, and 'bossed up' the other servants, as he used to call it. Indeed, I don't know what we should ever have done without him. As I've told you already, there was something superior about him that singled him out from the ordinary run of his class. You couldn't help thinking of him more as a bailiff than as a butler. He dealt with the tenants, collected the rents, and kept his accounts so exactly and in the most beautiful copper-plate handwriting."

"Ah, now I begin to see," said Malcolm sympathetically.

"Oh no, you don't," Miss Susan hurriedly interrupted him. "As far as money is concerned, Mr. Peters is the soul of honour. It was because of that—his reliability, I mean—that we became so dependent on him, and passed over little things that otherwise we might have objected to."

"You mean he became too familiar?"

"Well, so I thought at the time. . . ." She hesitated. "What I noticed first of all was that he seemed to have taken a dislike to me personally. I used to hear him saying terrible things about me behind my back. The other servants must have heard."

"Of course you told your sister?"

"Of course. Up till then we had always shared our confidences. It came as a great shock to me"—her lip trembled—"when Agatha appeared to be taking his side against me. So unlike her . . . and so humiliating!"

"So that's it!" Malcolm thought: "Persecution mania. Poor old thing!"

"But it's no good arguing with Agatha," Miss Susan went on pitifully, "she's so strong-minded. I felt—oh, so terribly isolated: Mr. Peters and Agatha on one side and me on the other! Do you know, if I'd had a penny of my own at that time, I really believe I should have left 'Bryntyrion.' But I hadn't even expectations. Of course, later on," she continued mysteriously, "I understood just what it meant . . ."

"Which was . . . ?"

"Let me tell you in my own way. Last autumn, you see, we both of us had influenza. I took it lightly—I'm very much stronger than I look—but Agatha was left with a sort of bronchitis. It always rains here, you know. That makes the house damp, and we hadn't enough money to repair it. Well, one night I woke up and thought I heard Agatha talking. I wondered if she were wandering—delirious, you know—so I lit a candle and put on my slippers and went out on to the landing; and I saw—oh, I hardly like to tell you! . . ." She put her hands to her eyes—"I saw Mr. Peters coming out of Agatha's room.

"That night I didn't sleep a wink, as you can imagine. Next morning, to my surprise, Agatha got up for breakfast. I felt so ashamed that I couldn't look at her. All through the meal she never spoke a word. Then, at the end of it, she got up, folded her napkin, and said, most terribly calmly: 'Susan, I have some news for you: I'm

going to marry Mr. Peters.'"

"So she isn't mad, after all," Henry Malcolm thought with relief. "Well, what did you say to that?" he asked encouragingly.

"Why, of course, I protested; I said it was quite impossible. I asked her what dear father, who was so exclusive, would have thought of a union of that kind; and that set poor Agatha off in a terrible rage: she said that she wasn't going to stand there and see her fiancé insulted. Outside of her presence, she said, I could say what I liked about Mr. Peters; but anyway he was a *Man*. Then Mr. Peters himself came in, and I had to stop."

"And she carried it through?"

"They were married three weeks later. Since that moment, Dr. Malcolm, my life has been one long agony. I can't even attempt to describe it. You see, poor Agatha lost her head completely; he could do no wrong; and Peters, who'd been bad enough before, became quite unbearable. All his beautiful manners—which, really, had been unexceptionable—were thrown to the wind. He went on with the housework, cleaning the silver and things like that; but when he sat down to table with us he was quite disgusting. He ate like a wolf, and when he had indigestion he made no attempt to conceal it. Indeed, he used to wink at me as though he took a pride in it. And Agatha—poor, dear Agatha—seemed quite blind to his disgusting coarseness. He ordered her about like a slave, and she'd only smile as

if she thought it was a privilege. Why, would you believe it? She didn't even protest when he brought a big brass spittoon into the drawing-room! Although I always carefully called him Mr. Peters, he insisted on calling me 'Sue.' And he called her 'Aggie'—such a vulgar abbreviation! It got so much on my nerves—his vulgarity and the way in which Agatha seemed to delight in it—that I couldn't bear sitting with them. I used to go up to my bedroom and freeze there: you see, Mr. Peters wouldn't allow us to have fires upstairs. 'Coal costs money,' he said, 'and if you think I'm going to chop wood for you, you're damn well mistaken!' You must excuse the word, Dr. Malcolm, but that's what he said and that's nothing, *nothing* to the language he generally uses!"

"Well, people of that kind, you know . . ." Henry Malcolm began.

"Oh, of course; I know only too well; it's unbelievable. But where was I? Oh yes. The fires . . . that was part of his plan. Apart from his food—he's excessively particular about that—he thinks about nothing but money. He's so mean. You can have no idea of his meanness. In the very first week after the marriage he dismissed our maids. He said it was ridiculous to have two able-bodied women (he never calls us ladies) in the house just eating their heads off. So Agatha, if you please, just had to do the cooking and me the housework, and if anything isn't just to his liking, you should hear the language. You've only to

look at my hands, Dr. Malcolm, to see what that means!"

And she held out her pitiful, toil-stained delicate fingers.

"So now that poor Agatha's ill in bed," she went on pathetically, "the whole of it falls on me. I'm no better than a slave, Dr. Malcolm; yet what can I do? I ask you, what can I do?" She wrung her hands helplessly. "It's not *that* I mind," she said, "it's just Agatha's illness. In spite of all her cruelty, she's still my sister, and I simply can't bear to see her wasting away like this!" Miss Susan composed her working features rapidly. "That's why," she went on, "I've slipped away without telling them, and dared to ask you, as an old friend of father's, to come and see her. Will you come?" she entreated.

"Why, of course, I'll be glad to consult with your local doctor," Malcolm told her. "What does *he* say about her?"

She shook her head. "They won't even allow me to call him in. You see, Dr. Meredith, our nearest doctor, lives ten miles away. His visits would be expensive, and Mr. Peters has persuaded Agatha that we can't afford them. He's had some experience of nursing, he says—I think he was an attendant in an asylum at one time—and really, to do the man justice, he *is* most attentive. He prepares all her food, and washes her, and makes her bed. Agatha herself is quite satisfied; she thinks he's wonderful; but, after all, Dr. Mal-

colm, Peters is an ignorant man, and if you *would* be so kind . . .”

“Of course I’ll come,” Malcolm told her. “I’ll walk up to ‘Bryntyryion’ this afternoon. You’d better warn them.”

“Oh, I don’t think I dare do that,” said Miss Susan tremulously. He watched her, a poor little shrunken figure, as she went fluttering away.

The road to “Bryntyryion” ran upward through lanes so deep and suffocating, between banks of over-arching hazel and insurgent bracken, that Malcolm was only aware at intervals of the line of mountain which dominated the sky like a hanging thunder-cloud. The air was all dead and dense, the blank sky so white with heat, the torment of wood-flies so incessant, that it was with a sense of relief that he emerged on to a higher plateau, a shelf upon the mountain’s flank, and saw before him the gloomy mass of stucco that the older Miss Morgan had inherited. It was a tall house, whose rectangular building had a low-pitched roof; an ugly, eerie-looking place, whose blank, uncurtained windows gave an impression of deadness and desolation. He approached it through an unkempt avenue of wind-tortured beeches that led to a sweep of moss-grown gravel skirting a pillared portico from which the plaster had fallen in flakes that gave it an aspect of disease. It was hard to imagine that any living soul inhabited it. The bell, which Malcolm rang, seemed to echo in utter emptiness.

For a long while his summons remained unanswered;

then heavy hobnails rang on the stone flags, and the warped door was pulled open with a screech. The man who opened it and glowered at him with grudging, suspicious eyes, was obviously Mr. Peters.

From that first glance Malcolm took a dislike to him. He was, as Miss Susan had indicated, by certain standards, a fine figure of a man; six feet of bulky masculinity. But the eyes of the physician saw more than that. They saw the body of a strong man who had gone soft with idleness and indulgence; an unruly paunch; pouched eyes; cheeks above whose lax muscles a fine network of congested blood-vessels showed a ruddiness that was not that of health. It was the body of a man who slept too much, ate too much, drank too much. The small eyes, set like a pig's in shallow orbits, were suffused with angry red at the inner corners. They were full of resentment, obstinacy; prepared to bluff. And yet, behind all their suspicion, fear was lurking. "This man is a coward," Malcolm thought. "I have his measure."

"Well, what do you want?" Mr. Peters asked him gruffly. He stood in the doorway, blocking it with his bulk. He was not inviting.

"You are Mr. Peters?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes. That's my name. What is it?"

"I have come to call on your wife. My name is Malcolm. I knew her when she was Miss Morgan."

"You can't see her," said Peters stolidly. "She's ill in bed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Malcolm blandly. "However, I'm glad I came. You see, I'm a doctor."

"A doctor?" Peters repeated. ("Yes, he's afraid," Malcolm thought.) "That makes no difference," the man went on. "It's nothing serious. I'm a bit of a nurse myself," he continued, with a smile that was not meant to be ugly. "What's more, Mrs. Peters has a great dislike to doctors. She refuses to see one, though I've pressed her again and again. Besides, she's asleep just now, and that's what she needs. I'm not going to wake her for you or anyone!" he added obstinately.

"Don't you think it's a pity to miss this opportunity?" Malcolm urged. "You see, I'm a very old friend of the family's: I knew her father, Colonel Morgan. I'm leaving the district to-morrow, and I think both she and Miss Susan would be disappointed if I missed seeing them."

"I don't know where Susan is," Peters answered. "And as for my wife, I've told you I'm not going to wake her."

"And I tell you I'm going to see her," said Malcolm firmly.

"Look here, I'd have you know this is my house," Peters blustered.

"It is not your house . . . not yet. And I'm going to see her."

The gross man went red in the face. His shoulders went back. It looked, for one moment, as if he intended

violence. Then his pig-eyelids fluttered, his protruded lips relaxed into an uneasy smile; his truculence vanished; he became, in one moment, that mixture of dignity and obsequiousness which is the well-trained manservant. With the manners of a perfect butler he bowed and stood aside for Malcolm to enter.

"Perhaps you are right, sir," he said. "It's not very often Mrs. Peters has the chance of seeing old friends. And to tell you the truth," he admitted, "I *am* a bit worried about her. Will you be so good as to wait here a minute?"

He showed Malcolm into a dank drawing-room, in which, among the relics of the Colonel's house, he recognized traces of Mr. Peters' occupation: the big brass spittoon, of which Miss Susan had told him; an odour of stale shag tobacco; a copy of the *Police Budget*, and a barrel of beer supported on an eighteenth-century love-seat. Within a few moments Peters lumbered in again.

"She's awake," he said, "and says she'll be pleased to see you. Only, if you'll take my advice, as one who knows her in and out, you'll be wise not to mention her illness. It only upsets her. All the same, I should take it as a great kindness on your part," he added, "if you'd just run your eye over her as a doctor, like, and give me any hints that come into your mind when you're alone with me afterwards. I don't say there's anything to worry about, but you never know. . . ."

"No, you never know," Malcolm agreed. "Perhaps

it would be just as well if you told me her symptoms beforehand?"

"Well, you see," Mr. Peters confided, "it's this indigestion. It's been troubling her for months. It's what I should call the acidity. She can't peck no more than a bird; and, of course, that means she's lost flesh. Seeing the way she was, I've taken no risks. A milk diet, just slops, nothing solid to bring on the pain. And no morsel of food has passed her lips, sir, that I haven't prepared with my own hands. Then she's had some trouble with her nerves as well; but I think that's just the result of lying in bed. One thing I will say, though, I couldn't have paid her more attention if she'd been my own child. And she'll tell you the same."

"Well, she *is* your own wife, isn't she?" Malcolm suggested.

Mr. Peters preceded him upstairs; through their creaking progress Malcolm became more than ever oppressed by "Bryntyryion's" dank emptiness. He wondered wherever that poor little Miss Susan had got to; he pictured her trembling in her bedroom, aware of his presence. Mr. Peters, with admirable decorum, knocked at the door. They entered.

"Here's Dr. Malcolm, love," said Peters kindly.

"It's very good of him, I'm sure," a feeble voice answered.

Even Malcolm, who was used to such sights, was shocked by the woman's appearance. Instead of the Miss Agatha he remembered, a strong, dark creature

with a certain grim hardness about her firm, handsome features, he saw a frail wisp of a woman with scanty grey hair, yellow and wasted. He took a seat at her bedside and pressed her thin hand. She gave a little gasp: "Oh, you hurt me!" she said. "My fingers are so tender I can scarcely bear anyone to touch them. Edward"—she beamed wanly on her husband—"is always very gentle with me. I'm so glad you have met him."

Malcolm was curiously touched by the humble gratitude of the glance which she gave Mr. Peters. Her eyes dwelt on him tenderly; it was obvious that she wanted the visitor to see the best of him. If ever he had seen love, blind devotion in a woman's eyes, Malcolm thought, he could see it in those. And Peters himself seemed different, gentle, solicitous. He wondered if, after all, he had done the man an injustice. But that tenderness in the fingers . . . ? His medical mind was at work.

All through their talk, which was of old times, his boyhood, the Colonel, his mind kept on working, his eyes were never at rest. Miss Agatha, as he still thought of her, went on talking with a gentle dreaminess, eagerly contriving to draw Mr. Peters into their conversation, displaying his unapparent virtues with the care of a mother showing off an uncomely child. Only when he happened to mention Miss Susan's name did her voice, her features, harden.

"I hardly like to tell you," she said, "but Susan has

not behaved well. She objected to our marriage. You can see for yourself how unreasonably," she added, with a loving glance at Mr. Peters. Mr. Peters, embarrassed, smiled and cleared his throat.

That tenderness of the fingers . . . that history of dyspepsia . . . that queer pigmentation of the skin . . .

Tactfully, almost without letting her know it, Malcolm diverted the conversation in the direction of Miss Agatha's illness. "She doesn't like to talk about it," Peters protested. "It always upsets her."

"Still, it does seem like missing an opportunity when the doctor's here," Miss Agatha replied.

Yes, for a long time she had been suffering from indigestion; she'd always had that tendency, but lately it had become much worse. Indeed, she couldn't imagine what she would have done without Edward. In times of sickness Susan was absolutely useless. But Edward—would he believe it?—was a perfect invalid cook. Such delicious, light, appetising food he prepared for her. And all with his own hands! If she'd had a trained nurse in the house she couldn't have been more comfortable. Apart from the indigestion there wasn't much wrong with her—nothing except that queer tenderness which had made her jump when they shook hands. Oh, no, it wasn't only in the fingers, it was in the arms as well. And in her legs, too; she could scarcely bear the touch of the bedclothes. And an odd tingling and numbness—as if they had gone to sleep! But that wasn't anything serious, really, was it?

"If you'd let me examine you for a moment," Malcolm suggested, "I'll try to be just as gentle with you as your husband."

"I'm not going to have you upset, love," said Peters, with a flash of the old stubbornness.

"I'd like him to, Edward darling," his wife entreated. By this time, whether she liked it or no, Malcolm meant to have his way. A perfunctory examination was enough to confirm his conjectures. The case was quite simple—a general peripheral neuritis. Three causes—three only, for alcohol was out of question. Lead, antimony, chronic arsenical poisoning. How . . . why? The answer to both of these questions seemed fairly obvious.

"It isn't serious?" Miss Agatha was saying. "It will be a great comfort to my dear husband if you can tell him that."

Malcolm smiled. "It's not serious at all. If you follow my instructions religiously you'll be well in a month. I'm ready to promise you that, if you do what I tell you."

"You may be sure we'll do that," said Peters, with humble gratitude. "I'm sure we're much obliged to you. This is a great relief."

"I'll talk to you downstairs. There's no point in tiring her further," said Malcolm.

Mr. Peters had spoken truly when he said that the verdict was a great relief. He seemed almost boyish and excited as he led Malcolm into the drawing-room and offered him a glass of beer.

"You've taken a great weight off my mind, doctor," he said. "Now what shall we do? I'll drive into town this evening and fetch out the medicine."

He spoke boisterously, confidently; the fear had gone out of his eyes; he was the perfect picture of a relieved, a devoted husband.

Malcolm chose his words carefully:

"Mr. Peters, I've said that this case is not serious. Well, it isn't—it won't be—if you obey my prescription to the letter. The person I'm most concerned about is not your wife but yourself."

"Why, doctor, you're wrong. I was never better in my life."

"Ah, there you're mistaken, my friend. As a doctor I know better. I'm being quite candid when I tell you that your life is in danger. Wait a moment—let me go on. All this long anxiety, all this watching at your wife's bedside, all this delicate invalid cookery—unless we do something about it I won't answer for the consequences. Your obvious anxiety has been getting on the poor woman's nerves. You play on each other. You're having a bad effect on her. This isn't a matter of medicine, it's plain common sense. Now listen to me. There's no time to be lost. You must leave 'Bryntyryion' this evening. Go right away from here!"

"But, doctor!" Mr. Peters was pale as a sheet, his thick lips quivered. "No doubt she will miss you," Malcolm continued smoothly. "But it's you who have to be considered, Mr. Peters. You leave 'Bryntyryion'

this evening. If you don't come back I guarantee she'll be better in a month. Miss Susan will have to take up the invalid cookery; she's perfectly capable of doing so, don't you worry. Now remember," he went on sternly, "you are going away this evening. I advise you not to tell anyone when or where. If you don't come back—well, that will be even better for you. If you *do* come back, I shall know. Be quite sure of that! So I warn you, here and now, it's a matter of life and death. Understand?"

From the blanched terror in Peters' eyes Malcolm knew that he understood.

He left "Bryntyrion," that ghastly house, without another word. Midway on his journey homeward a frail black figure fluttered out of the hedge. It was little Miss Susan, who had run down the hill to intercept him.

"You've seen him . . . and her?" she gasped. "Oh, is it all right?"

"It's all right, Miss Susan," he told her. "You'll have to get busy. Your brother-in-law is going on a holiday."

"A holiday? Where?" she stammered.

"I haven't the least idea where. But he's going. That's all that matters. I want you to promise me one thing," he went on calmly. "I'm returning to London to-morrow by the first train; I shan't see you again. Now if Mr. Peters has not left 'Bryntyrion' by then, or if he comes back—which I don't think he will—or

if anything happens that you think I'd like to know—and I want to know everything—will you promise to send me a wire to my house in Harley Street? Number forty-seven. Be sure you remember.”

“Yes, yes, I'll remember,” she said eagerly. “But Agatha, doctor . . . ?”

“I promise you that Agatha will be as well as you are in a month.”

“Oh, how can I thank you?” she cried.

“You needn't thank me,” he laughed. “But don't forget what I've told you. Now run along home to your sister; she may be needing you.”

Next evening, when Malcolm opened the door of his house in Harley Street, he found a telegram awaiting him in the hall. Although he guessed what was inside it he opened it eagerly.

“*Terrible accident,*” he read, “*Peters shot dead accidentally this evening while cleaning gun. Susan Morgan.*”

With a smile of satisfaction on his face he tore the telegram into fragments. The last day of his holiday, he reflected, had been the most profitable of all.

Eros and Psyche

THEY met, for the first time, in the gallery of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, at a performance of the Russian Ballet. On the first night he noticed her. On the next two she knew he was watching her, but not daring to speak. On the fourth he came closer; he stood at the balustrade behind her. She was aware of a pale, sensitive hand, with filbert-shaped finger-nails, that fluttered nervously nearer and nearer behind her head—so aware of it that the bright stage dissolved into a roseate blur and the music became no more than a counterpoint to her quickened pulse, and the dancers (even her adored Massine!) mere marionettes, jerked on invisible wires. On the sixth night—they were playing Rimsky's "Scheherezade"—he manœuvred so cleverly that she found herself sitting next to him. He held a hired score of the music on his knees. When she peeped over, he pushed it nearer so that half of it rested on hers. They followed, or pretended to follow it together. The score was a physical link, uniting their two bodies; the music a tremulous web of sound stretched between them, across which their emotions, which waxed and waned with the ballet's changing rhythm, crossed and

re-crossed like silent flying shuttles. When that passionate orgy of sound and colour was over and the gallery lights went up, he turned to her.

"It's rather old-fashioned, isn't it?" he said. And she knew at once that he must be a superior person who found Bakst blatant and Rimsky Korsakov vulgar: a person, in short, who was up-to-date, like herself. Then his tone changed suddenly; his voice had a new vibration.

"Is it really you? I have been waiting for this so long," he said, "that I can hardly believe it."

She smiled. "I know," she said.

"You knew?" His face glowed with triumph.

"Of course I knew."

Now that they had spoken and were close together she could look at his face. Though not daring to dwell on it for long, she could see that it was distinguished—a longish face, with a smooth, pale brow, made higher and more impressive by Spanish whiskers—which was just as it should be, for Spanish Art was now in the air. He had fine, dark eyes, fringed with lashes so black that they might almost have been painted; a straight nose, with delicately turned nostrils; a mouth which was either passionately ascetic or ascetically passionate—she couldn't decide, for the moment, which sounded better. His clothes had exactly the fashionable degree of shabbiness. His speech . . . well, she couldn't be quite so sure of that. It certainly wasn't the kind of speech to which she was accustomed; the vowels were

either slightly foreign or slightly cockney. It was better, on the whole, to decide that they were foreign.

"What is your name?" he said.

She hesitated. "Why should we have names?" she asked.

"Mine's Cyril."

She felt forced to speak the truth—or part of it. "Mine's Helena," she said.

"Helena . . ." he repeated. "How beautiful! *Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?* This is very extraordinary, isn't it?"

It was, she reflected, much more extraordinary than he could possibly imagine. That was what gave the adventure its authentic thrill. It was extraordinary, to begin with, that she should be sitting on that wooden shelf in the gallery, when she might have been sitting with her mother in the grand-tier box below. It was extraordinary that she, Helena Pomfret, whose father was a marquess, an ex-viceroy, and a Knight of the Garter, should be "picked up" by a strange young man with Spanish whiskers in the gallery.

She had chosen the gallery because of its intellectual altitude; because she had heard it whispered that all the best people (in *her* sense, not in her mother's) frequented it. She had chosen the gallery as a symbol of emancipation, of rebellion; its very discomfort was a psychological luxury. She had chosen it—most of all—because, if she had descended, in a physical and artistic sense, to her mother's box, she would have been pursued

and devoured all evening by the earnest, amorous, pale-blue eyes of her admirer, Lord Ledwyche (pronounced Ledditch) whom her family and his had decided she was destined to marry. Even in the country a little of Ledwyche went a long way. Against the highly sophisticated, intensely modern background of the Russian Ballet his presence was discordant. Not that Helena disapproved of discords. On the contrary, she adored them just as long as they didn't happen to be generally admired by the wrong people, such as Charlie Ledwyche. If Charlie had been frankly eighteenth-century baroque she could have tolerated him; if he had been Cubistic, like a skyscraper, she could have been proud of him; but his style was all wrong—it belonged neither to the day before yesterday nor to the day after to-morrow; he was just the wrong period. Sham Gothic, like the Houses of Parliament, which he so decorously adorned.

This dark young man, on the other hand, was just what he should be—Charlie Ledwyche's physical and temperamental opposite. There was something, she decided, elemental about him. When the lights went down again they danced "*Après-midi d'un Faune*." Shyly glancing at him, while the oboe reedily skipped and quavered above a shimmer of strings, she knew that—apart from the whiskers—there was something southern about his pale face. He was like a sleek-skinned faun himself. The light in those lazy, black-fringed eyes was undeniably pagan. Yes, pagan . . . that was the word!

She was a pagan herself. When the ballet was over he helped her on with her coat, assuming an air that was deferential and yet proprietary.

"Could you bear to have supper with me somewhere?" he asked, remotely. It seemed as if it were a matter of indifference to him if she did or didn't: and it was this very indifference, so unlike the unfailing chivalrous courtesy of Charlie Ledwyche, that impelled her to accept. "Thank goodness he doesn't know who I am," she thought, "or he might take fright."

On the pavement outside the theatre she waited for him to call a taxi. He didn't. And though she felt terribly exposed in the naked street, hoping all the time that nobody in her own world would catch sight of her in the company of a strange and rather odd-looking young man, she found a strange thrill in walking westward through the green-smelling garbage of Covent Garden instead of stealing silkily homeward in the family Daimler. When they crossed the street he didn't even take her arm. Of course, a faun wouldn't.

The night was frostily clear, with a sailing moon that made London, even that squalid London, beautiful. He took her to a shabby club in Soho—so shabby that she felt quite secure from any eyes that knew her, so cheap that it made her conscious of her clothes and induced her to fold her coat carefully, concealing the Paquin label inside it. They ate leberwurst sandwiches and drank an extremely acrid Chianti which, after the first two glasses, tasted like nectar. It also had the effect

of warming up Cyril (as she now dared to call him) making him much less remote but more definitely faun-like than ever. They talked about modern music, art, literature. He seemed even more exclusively up-to-date than she was. She discovered that Debussy, Matisse and Marcel Proust were back numbers. The way of salvation lay with Honegger, Brancusi and Gertrude Stein. Her own taste, it appeared, were all incurably *bourgeois*. In modern life there were only two alternatives—to be an aristocrat or a proletarian. Cyril himself, it appeared, inclined to the former. Personally—though she didn't dare tell him so—Helena had had enough of aristocracy.

When midnight came, and the shabby waiter brought them the bill, she had sudden qualms of conscience. The intenser light of the night-club had shown her that Cyril's clothes, though carefully pressed, were thread-bare. It didn't seem right, she said, that he should be allowed to pay for both of them. Her timorous suggestion withered him like a blast of ice. His pride was so hurt that she felt overwhelmed with shame. Her protest was just exactly what he meant by being *bourgeois*. He took her thanks coldly, as though they added insult to injury. She was bound to make some amends.

"Well, next time . . ." she said.

"Next time?" he smiled; his eyes brightened; he was no longer a divinely superior person, but an interested male. She withdrew herself quickly, but knew that it was too late.

"On Saturday they're doing the new Spanish Ballet," he told her. "Will you meet me outside Covent Garden at half-past seven?"

His dark eyes were so compelling that she dared not refuse him. It would be cowardly to hurt his feelings, she thought. No proletarian, no real aristocrat, could possibly hesitate. Although she knew that this meeting would involve her in a complicated tissue of lies she consented. He took it as a matter of course.

"Then I'd better see you home," he went on superbly. And this time he took her hand.

At this panic seized her. Whatever else happened it wouldn't do for her to be seen with him in Grosvenor Square, where every opened door threatened shameful discovery.

"Oh, you needn't do that," she said. "If you'd be kind enough to take me just to the nearest Tube station."

"Where do you live?" he asked her point-blank.

Choosing the first suburb that came into her mind she told him: "Clapham."

"Clapham!" he repeated, and his fine lips curled. "I live in Bloomsbury."

His tone implied that to live anywhere else in these days was a mortal offence. She felt so humiliated that she was almost tempted to tell him the truth and be hanged to it. She couldn't; his artist's pride might take equal offence. It was rather fun, as a matter of fact, to adventure into this world of make-believe; it gave her a feeling of rich, unexerted power; kept open a safe

line of retreat with her boats unburned. His little, high-brow superiority was really comical—almost pathetic.

They walked in a frigid silence to the next Tube station. He paid for her ticket contemptuously. "Clapham," he said, as though the word polluted his lips. At parting, however, he seemed loth to surrender her hand. Suddenly, surprisingly, hungrily, he kissed her! She plunged down the stairs like a rabbit bolting for its hole.

Yet, when she dismounted from the train at the very next station and went fluttering across Mayfair to her home in Grosvenor Square, the memory of that kiss, the first that had ever been raped so perfunctorily, pursued her. It was so savagely different from any other she had known. It went so much deeper. She had a feeling that Marvell, the butler, who opened the door with so stately a gesture, must be able to see its imprint on her blushing cheek. Even when she laid her face on the cool pillow its warmth went on burning into her mind.

During the following week, while the normal life of her family absorbed her, she assured herself a hundred times that she had no intention of keeping the appointment on Saturday. The memory of the whole incident had a disturbing quality in comparison with which her everyday experience of a girl in what journalists call "society" seemed reassuringly sane and safe. . . . Safe

. . . The very word was a challenge to her rebellious nature. There was a phrase that continually mocked her; something about "living dangerously." Of course the words were inapplicable. There was nothing dangerous in this case. She was secure in the armour of her anonymity. Even if he *did* kiss her again, as he probably would, the person whom he kissed would be an imaginary person, a creature whom she had invented for her own amusement, not herself.

Yet, as the hour approached, this attitude of humorous detachment became more difficult. She tried to "keep it up" by making elaborate preparations, dressing her mind and her body in a costume appropriate to the part she was playing: the part of an emancipated—but not *too* emancipated—young suburban lady.

They met, as had been arranged, outside the theatre. Apparently he had forgiven her for the sin of living in Clapham. They called each other Helena and Cyril; sat close together; isolated in the celestial height in the gallery they condescended to patronise the world in general and particularly the boring denizens of stalls and boxes, among whom she recognized a number of her most intimate friends. Once more they supped at the shabby club in Soho, though, this time, Cyril magnanimously allowed her to pay her share. Once more, at parting, he kissed her. Once more she returned by way of a hypothetical Clapham, to Grosvenor Square, with the promise of another meeting to look forward to.

Another meeting, and then many more. But only once a week. At the time of their first encounter, it appeared he had been taking a holiday, and now that that was over it was difficult for him to get away for more than one evening in seven. He was working so hard—at music, he implied; and as proof of this he allowed her to see some of the songs he had written. The manuscripts were extremely difficult to decipher, they were so dashingly scored. When she played them over to herself in the huge, dust-sheeted drawing-room at Grosvenor Square, which was only used for her mother's political receptions, she could never be quite sure that she hit the right notes; but this didn't really matter; because the idiom was so modern that if it sounded wrong it was probably right. Which proved—even if she hadn't had the assurance from his own lips—that he was a genius. The works of a genius were invariably misunderstood. Even the works of Wagner, that still overrated back number, had been misunderstood by his contemporaries.

Yes, whatever else he might be, Cyril was undoubtedly a genius. And that made it quite unimportant what else he was. It excused his shabby clothes; it even excused his accent, which she had finally been compelled to confess was not foreign but cockney. Genius made all things equal. She decided, in fact, that she would actually prefer not to know too much about him; because, if she questioned him closely, he might question her too, and she might find herself involved in a web

of deceptions depending on the original lie she had told when she said that she lived in Clapham. Once, when a full-page photograph appeared in a paper with a detailed description of herself and her parentage, she went in terror for weeks lest Cyril should see it and recognise her. She need not have worried, she told herself afterwards; his interests were far too exalted to allow him to glance at that kind of paper.

It seemed, somehow, in keeping with the mystery of the whole affair, that she never saw him in daylight. Their friendship—they were both of them careful to insist upon that word—was a thing elusive and moth-like, an unreal emanation of the sweet London dusk from which any intrusion of the material, the physical, might brush the bloom. They were primarily concerned with each other's minds and souls. This was, they assured each other, an intellectual comradeship in which two young, eager minds, with eyes wide open, were prepared to discuss any subject under the sun. With a cold and exalted detachment they debated not only the arts—which, naturally, were much more important than life—but problems of human conduct, such as Communism (they were both Communists, of course), prostitution, birth-control.

At first these discussions filled poor Helena with confusion, for no living Pomfret had ever spoken of such things, but Cyril, when he saw her confused, became almost stern. To be capable of being shocked was a *bourgeois* trait; and when once she had got over her

first awkwardness she found a certain elevated excitement in calling spades spades. Cyril noticed this, and approved. It was something of an achievement to have educated this little mouse from Clapham up to his own intellectual level. It made him ruthless, haughty, patronising, towards her; and Helena didn't mind. Indeed, she found an odd satisfaction in the docile humility with which she accepted his views on free trade, free verse and free love. She experienced, in fact, the luxury of indulging in a double life, a divided personality; sitting, one night, a paragon of propriety, at one of her father's political dinners in Grosvenor Square, and then, on the next, treading the littered pavements of Soho with her arm locked in Cyril's and supping in that shady little club among people at whom Marvell, the butler, would have turned up his distinguished nose.

And the beauty of the whole thing was this: that apart from their meeting and parting kisses, which, occasionally, on his side, were disturbingly ardent, their relations, so far, had been rigidly Platonic. He had never, in a vulgar way, attempted to make love to her. They went floating, divided like another and undesirous Paolo and Francesca, through an intellectual heaven. Impersonally. . . .

She sometimes wondered how long this blessed impersonality would last, and how she would react if ever they found themselves betrayed into a passionate situation. To confess the truth, she was far less sure of herself than of Cyril. Those Platonic kisses were not

without its effect on her. Their fleeting contacts had fertilized her dormant emotions. She was a normal, well-nourished young woman; and though she was prepared to answer for her waking hours, she found that she could not banish the memory of his more ardent moments from her dreams. Even in her everyday life the excitement of these memories persisted. They gave a brilliance to her eyes, a colour to her cheeks, they endowed her with the communicable radiance of a girl who has tasted love—even Platonic love; a tremulous, tender brightness so noticeable that it inspired the unfortunate Ledwyche to renew his hopeful attentions. In some curious way she had become more attractive to men than ever before.

It was significant too, that when, as was usual in February, her mother shot off to St. Moritz, she found herself inventing excuses, and refused to accompany her. It was far more difficult to explain her attitude to herself than to her mother, and, finally, she abandoned the attempt. But when, a month later, the family moved down to their villa at Cannes, she felt that her stock of colourable excuses was exhausted. Although she detested the idea she would have to go South. In a carefully modified version she broke the news to Cyril.

"I'm going away next week," she said, "so I'm afraid we shan't meet."

"Where are you doing?" he asked grudgingly.

She told him: "Bournemouth." For Bournemouth

seemed to bear the same relation to Clapham as Cannes to Grosvenor Square.

"It's early in the year," he suggested, "to be taking a holiday."

"Not for Bournemouth," she said. "It's almost like the Riviera. Besides, I haven't any choice. We have to take turns."

"How long are you going for?" he asked.

"Oh, just for a month or two," she answered carelessly.

"A month or two? What's the meaning of that? Have you lost your job?"

"How silly of me," she corrected herself hurriedly. "I mean a week or two."

"I might run down there for a week-end perhaps," he said.

She was thrilled by his eagerness. "No, no; it'll be all the lovelier when I come back," she said. "Let's wait until then. But how shall I let you know when I'm home again?" she asked him. "Where can I find you? You've told me that you live in Bloomsbury, but never said where. It's odd, Cyril. Do you realize that I don't even know your other name?"

At this he grew almost angry. "I don't know yours. What's more, I don't want to know it. Why, don't you see that that's the most wonderful thing about our friendship? Like Eros and Psyche. . . ."

"Eros and Psyche?" she asked.

"D'you mean to say you don't know?" he asked

harshly. He took pity on her ignorance. "It's extraordinary the number of things that you don't know," he said. But it flattered him, none the less, to treat her as a superior, instructing her ignorance.

"It's one of those legends," he said, "that enshrine an essential truth. Psyche was a Greek girl, a simple creature, but so lovely that her beauty ravished the eyes of Eros, the God of Love. He stole down from Olympus at night and became her lover, in a kind of remote and dream-like communion, something like ours. And, like me, he insisted that if their relation were to retain its secret loveliness, she must never know who he was, ask his name, or look upon his face."

"Like Lohengrin?" she suggested.

"Yes, but Wagner's so vulgar," he reproved her. "This story is Greek. . . . Well, Psyche, being a woman, a mortal woman, was curious. One night her inquisitiveness got the better of her. She lit a lamp and bent over him to see his face. She was so excited and trembling that a spot of hot oil fell on to his shoulder. Eros awoke. He vanished. She never saw him again. And that," he went on, "is how I feel about us. If either of us ever really knew who the other was, there'd be an end to our happiness. The bloom would have gone from it. We'd never be the same again."

Helena thankfully agreed. They certainly wouldn't. As far as she was concerned this fancy of his was most fortunate, if only because it shielded her from the discovery of all the lies she had told him. Still, all the

same, of late, she had often caught herself wondering who Cyril really was.

"But how can I let you know when I'm back," she said, "if I haven't your name and address?"

"Quite simply," he said. "How long have you taken your rooms for? I suppose you won't stay in a boarding-house?"

"Oh no, we never do that," she told him truthfully.

"A fortnight, did you say?" He looked at his diary. "You see, that week, I shan't have a free night till Friday. . . ."

"And I shan't be back until Saturday," she said, fighting for time.

"In that case we lose another whole week," he told her, petulantly. "However, I suppose that can't be helped. We'll meet on the 3rd of April. In Piccadilly Circus, at seven, on the island"—he smiled—"where the statue of Eros stands. And for God's sake don't call it '*Eeros*,' " he added didactically. "Remember the 'E' is short and the 'o' is long."

That night she found it extremely difficult to escape from his kisses; yet the difficulty was as nothing compared with that which she would have to circumvent in escaping from Cannes in three weeks' time. By that date, she knew, she would be deeply involved in the Riviera's social activities; her mother had already been a little huffy about her not coming to St. Moritz; Ledwyche had made a point of arranging to accompany them; he had gone gliding over the Alps on skis with

a face like Hamlet's, and she, Lady Pomfret, had felt it her duty to entertain him, which was no easy job in his aggrieved state of mind. And Ledwyche, as Helena knew, was now going to Cannes for the pleasure of her company!

Indeed, when she stepped into the Blue Train at Calais, Charlie Ledwyche was there to receive her, having been warned, through some mischievous collusion on her mother's part, of the time of her departure. All through the journey, except when she was locked in her sleeper, he did his manly best to entertain her with his rich store of personal and political gossip; but his best, alas, was far too manly for Helena. She was finding it increasingly difficult to identify herself with the interests of the world to which they both belonged. It seemed as flat and trim and unadventurous as those plains of Northern France through which they were being whirled, compared with the ragged, romantic uplands which she and Cyril had trodden together.

Checked by her coolness, Ledwyche became aggrieved and humble; she couldn't help comparing the humility of this noble paragon with Cyril's arrogance. She even found herself making physical comparisons, from which she emerged convinced that the real reason why she couldn't marry Ledwyche was the fact that he belonged to her own blond physical type. It was their essential difference, she decided, that made Cyril so attractive to her—the difference of their bodies and their upbringing (she jibbed at the word "class") reconciled in their

sharing of common interests. In little lapses of manners Cyril might sometimes offend her. Charlie Ledwyche's manners were faultless, but he bored her to tears.

All the expensive artificialities of life at Cannes, where one saw exactly the same people as at home in slightly thinner clothes, bored her equally. Their transplanted conventions made her feel a traitor to her kind. Her only relief from that hothouse atmosphere was to be found in the flowery foothills of the Maritime Alps, where she went for long, lonely walks, always thinking of Cyril, in a pagan setting that called for his faun-like presence. Then the Russian Ballet opened a season at Monte Carlo, bringing memories even more poignant. When finally, one afternoon, she saw them dance the "Après-midi d'un Faune," she could bear it no longer. "I suppose I am in love," she admitted at last, and retired to her room with a raging imaginary toothache.

Her mother made anxious enquiries. "I hear there's an excellent French dentist here," she said.

But Helena couldn't bear the idea of submitting her teeth to a foreigner: not even the suggestion of a brilliant American would satisfy her.

"It's no good, mother dear," she said: "I shall have to go back to London."

"And leave Ledwyche dumped on my hands, I suppose!" said her mother angrily. "Upon my soul, Helena, I don't know what's come to you lately."

"Well, really, mother darling, if you think it's fun having toothache. . . ."

"I don't. But I assure you it's no fun to have him glooming round."

"I'll come back as soon as it's better," said Helena, soothingly.

Of course, she had no intention of doing anything of the sort. Her only anxiety was to reach London in time for her meeting with Cyril.

She did so, by catching the earliest boat-train from Paris, with two hours to spare. It was delightful, for once in a way, to have the vast house in Grosvenor Square to herself, to be able to come and go without feeling that all her movements were being watched—delightful, that is, for everybody but Marvell, the butler, whose perfect manners failed to hide his annoyance at having a well-earned holiday broken into by her arrival.

"You needn't put yourself out at all, Marvell," she told him humbly. "I'm going to dine out to-night, and to-morrow I shan't be in to lunch. I'll take a latchkey, so that you needn't even wait up for me."

"Very good, my lady," said Marvell, smiling as though he hated her.

They met, by the place where the statue of Eros (*not* Eeros) stands. It wasn't at all the kind of meeting that Helena had imagined. She came to him full of soft, warm, fluttering emotions. He received her off-handedly, coldly, with harsh arrogance, as though he begrudged her the time she had spent away from him, as though she had become a stranger.

"I suppose you enjoyed yourself?" he asked her bitterly.

"Not terribly," she admitted.

"What was Bournemouth like?"

"Oh, quite lovely. The anemones were out, and the asphodel . . ."

"Asphodel?" he asked sharply.

"I mean, don't you know, it felt just like Italy—like what Italy must be—you can imagine—at this time of year. But Cyril, my dear, you don't seem a bit pleased to see me!"

For answer he took her arm savagely. It was a soft April evening. He led her, not to their usual restaurant, but to the Green Park. A mild sky grew dim above them; the trees were in bud; the air was full of the chirrup of mating sparrows, the gathering dusk with the voices of happy lovers. When, at last, in a sheltered corner, he broke silence, his tone was strange and harsh.

"I want to talk seriously to you, Helena," he said. "These last three weeks have been hell for me. I can hardly believe it. But to-night we must face the facts. I love you," he said.

She was silent. Her heart was too full, at that moment, for speech. At last she produced one word: "Well . . .?"

"Well," he repeated passionately. "Well, what are we going to do about it? I know you love me. I suppose you're not going to deny it?"

She couldn't deny it. "I suppose I love you," she said.

"If I didn't love you I imagine I shouldn't be here."

"Well, what are we to do about it?" he repeated. "We're neither of us children. We're a man and a woman with our eyes open: we have no illusions, and, thank God, we're both of us above all the *bourgeois* proprieties. We're sufficiently intelligent not to take any risks—you know what I mean—and even if we could afford to marry, which we can't, there would be no sense in binding ourselves with old-fashioned fetters of that kind. You understand that?"

"Of course," she answered softly.

"It isn't as if we hadn't discussed all this theoretically a hundred times. We both of us believe in freedom—absolute freedom. Our souls and our bodies are our own, to do what we like with; we neither of us have any religious scruples to handicap us. . . . So. . . . What do you say about it?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I love you. I need you. Terribly. You're essential to my music, my life. I want you to be my mistress."

Of course she had known what was coming; yet, when it came, some radical prudishness within her was offended by the word. She stifled its promptings vigorously. They were unworthy of her—unworthy of her fine, free, emancipated, passionate modernity. What would become of their frank and glorious equality, their high-flown theories, if she refused him? And yet. . . .

"I'm afraid I'm an awful coward, Cyril," she told him.

"You mean that you won't?" He went paler in the dusk. "So that's what you are! In that case," he went on bitterly, "I'll say good-night. Good-night and good-bye!" He was quite old-fashionedly melodramatic. "I'm sorry, my dear Helena. It seems I was mistaken in you."

He moved away from her, as though he were actually going, and Helena's heart went cold at the thought of losing him. "I'm behaving just like a prudish housemaid," she thought. "What's the use of loving if you haven't the courage to love? All the things we've agreed on—and I fail at the very first test! Besides, as he says, we're free, and there isn't any risk. Risk? Ah, what a mean word! I, who talked about living dangerously!" She stretched out her hand to him. "Don't go . . . come back to me," she said. Submissively she asked him: "What do you want me to do?"

He took her in his arms like a flushed conqueror. "My darling, I knew you'd not fail me," he said. "To-morrow. . . . I have everything planned. . . . I've arranged to take the whole day off as well as to-night. That means that we needn't be back in town till Monday afternoon. It's almost too late for us to go out of London to-night. . . ."

"Oh yes," she agreed hurriedly, thinking of Marvell, "I should have to arrange."

"But to-morrow morning, early," he went on, "we can go down into the country. There's a place I know

not far from Ashford in Kent—a small inn called ‘The Pomfret Arms.’ ”

She shivered; the sound of her own name fell on her brain like an icy douche; the inn that he mentioned was within a few hundred yards of her father’s lodge-gates; it was a place where hounds sometimes met; the landlord would certainly recognize her at a glance.

“I happen to know the people who keep it,” he was saying; “they’ll look after us well. Of course, we can book separate rooms, and nobody need suspect. If I say we’re engaged that’ll be quite enough explanation.”

“Oh no,” she said hurriedly, “that’s too dreadful. A small place like that. . . . Let’s go somewhere where we shall be lost among hundreds of strangers—where nobody knows you or me. . . .”

“Well, they wouldn’t know *you*. But, anyway, my dear child,” he conceded generously, “I’m prepared to go anywhere you like as long as you’re with me.”

“I don’t think I like Kent,” she said. “I suppose Bournemouth’s too far?”

“Why, everybody’s been seeing you in Bournemouth for the last fortnight,” he said. “It’s not only too far, it’s too expensive. We’re not millionaires. One would think, from the way you talk, you’d come into a fortune!”

Finally, in spite of his scorn, they decided on South-end. It was comfortable to Helena to feel that the estuary of the Thames would lie stretched between her and her own county—to feel, again, that no acquaint-

ance of hers could conceivably visit a resort so plebeian.

She went back to Grosvenor Square that night with a spinning head, and was heartily thankful that she had instructed the butler not to wait up for her. Before she retired to her sleepless bed she wrote a note which she told her maid to give Marvell in the morning. She was going down into the country for Sunday night, to visit a friend, she told him, and would be back for dinner on Monday at half-past seven.

"Well, now I am in for it!" she thought, as she sealed the envelope.

Next morning, on the platform at Liverpool Street, Cyril was waiting for her. He looked pale, and extremely distinguished; he, too, had not slept. At the ticket-office she almost betrayed herself by asking, automatically, for a first-class ticket; but Cyril fortunately forestalled her: this day, for once, he had decreed, she must be his guest.

In the electric train they found themselves wedged into a mass of third-class Sunday trippers. The compartment was so crowded that they could not even sit side by side. She sat jammed between an earnest little boy, with steel-rimmed spectacles and a running nose, and his mother, a fat perspiring woman who smelt of fish and radiated a suffocating heat. Cyril sat opposite her. She watched him. His fine face was pale as an ivory carving. He looked tired and nervous. Sometimes he smiled at her; but, for the most part, he sat with his dark-lashed eyelids closed. And all the time,

as the train went whirling through reverberant tunnels, then out into the unspeakable squalors of the East End—Bow, Stepney, Whitechapel, Barking—she was thinking how strangely unromantic this honeymoon journey was; contrasting it, in spite of herself, with that other southward journey in the Blue Train with Ledwyche. She didn't love Ledwyche; she supposed she did love Cyril. And yet, when she came to think of it, how safe she had felt with the other—how many essential, though trivial, things they had had in common! Trivial? Were they so trivial after all? Weren't they, in fact, the whole basic structure of her life, her birth, her breeding? With Ledwyche, she knew just exactly where she was, while with this dark stranger. . . .

It came as a shock to her to remember that she didn't even know his name, nor he hers. That, to begin with, was enough to make the whole adventure unreal, unsubstantial, uncertain. Yet, hadn't they agreed—oh, long ago!—that it was this very circumstance that made the affair so romantically thrilling? Eros and Psyche! . . . To question the illusion was to shatter it. And yet she knew nothing about him, nothing whatever, except that they shared a few tastes and theories. Why, for all she knew, he might even be a criminal, a murderer! "Well, here I am," she thought. "*Cæ y est!* I've got to go through with it."

And of course, to be logical, this journey had not begun at Liverpool Street that morning; it had begun at the moment when Ledwyche had shown her into the

train at Cannes. It would end, God knew how, in some sordid lodging in Southend. "I'm a free woman," she told herself. "Well, this is the price of freedom."

By the time they reached Southend, hot and exhausted, an April sun was shining torridly. A pallid, bedraggled Cyril insisted on carrying her handbag. He looked so frail and harassed among the bewildering crowd of trippers that she felt positively sorry for him.

"Oh, do let me carry my own bag," she pleaded with him.

He refused in an irritated voice.

"You look so ill, Cyril."

"Do I? I've a splitting headache. I get them sometimes. I expect it was the stuffy train and those foul people—and then this blinding sun."

"Let's go into the first place we see," she begged him.

He consented, in silence. It was a little commercial hotel, frequented by trippers. The entrance smelt of beer. Big placards luridly advertised meat-teas and cockles. In a sordid eating-room loud-voiced women were picking out winkles with hat-pins. Cyril dumped down his bag with a sigh of relief and took off his hat. Lank hair clung blackly to a white brow bedewed with moisture. A bustling vision of peroxide accosted them briskly.

"Well, what can I do for you, dearies?"

"Can you put us up for the night?"

"One room? A married couple?" She glanced shrewdly at Helena's ring-finger.

"No, two rooms," Cyril answered limply. "This lady's my fiancée."

"That's all right. Twelve shillings, please. Many thanks, sir. You might step upstairs, number five and number eight, at the other end of the passage. You'll excuse me showing you up, won't you? Dinner's just about to be served, and we're short-handed to-day. Lovely weather, isn't it, for April? Dinner for two?"

"I couldn't eat a thing," said Cyril. "What about you?"

"Oh, I'm not a bit hungry," said Helena. She was dying of hunger.

She found herself, a moment later, in a horrible bedroom—a bedroom compared with which that of her maid at Grosvenor Square might have been made for Ninon de Lenclos. By this time, apparently, Cyril's headache had reached an unendurable pitch. "I think I'm going to be sick," he had gasped, as he staggered into his room.

Helena sat on the sagging bed. From below she heard a rumour of loud, beery voices. She felt so lonely and miserable that she could have cried. The noise, the squalor of the place, were getting on her nerves. "But Cyril must be feeling far worse than I do, poor dear!" she thought; and pity for his pain and exhaustion compelled her, at last, to pull herself together. She made herself as tidy as she could; then tiptoed along the coconut matting of the passage and knocked at his bedroom door.

"Come in!" a feeble voice told her.

She entered. He was lying, in his shirt-sleeves, utterly abject and helpless, on the bed. His face showed a yellow pallor against the pillow's dubious whiteness. He opened dazed eyes and looked at her, but did not speak. When she saw him like that her pity was stronger than any other emotion.

"You poor, poor darling!" she said.

She lay down on the bed beside him and began to stroke his head, just as her old nurse would stroke her own when she was tired.

"Ah, that's lovely," he said, relaxing. His hands were too feeble even to touch her. He seemed so happy to feel the movement of her fingers through his hair that she was overcome, for the first time since she had known him, with a strange, sweet tenderness—this wild, this faun-like creature, so tamed and helpless under her hands!

Gradually, under the influence of her stroking, he grew drowsy; his breathing became slower and shallower. In a little while she realized that he was asleep. Very gently and carefully she moved herself away from him. She had visions of the peroxide lady coming to call them for dinner and finding them, shamefully, together. She felt, on the whole, that now he was sleeping, it would be better to return to her own room.

The bed creaked as she put her feet to the floor, and still he did not wake. Cautiously, on tiptoe, she moved

towards the door. Behind it, on a hook, his coat was hanging, inside out. A sheaf of papers protruded from the breast-pocket so far that they might almost fall out. Should she put them in again? Or should she look?

Eros and Psyche. . . . The sinister fable flickered across her mind.

"His name," she thought, "it would be wonderful to know his name. . . ."

She glanced at them furtively. If she could only see without moving them! She couldn't. She was tempted. Well, what, after all, did it matter? He was sleeping as soundly as ever; he would never know!

With tremulous, careful fingers she extracted the papers from his pocket. The first was a letter. There was a marquisal coronet on the flap of the envelope. It was like the envelope which she had herself addressed to Marvell overnight. How curious! She slipped the letter out of the envelope. "Am I dreaming?" she thought. The address was that of her own house in Grosvenor Square; her father's Garter surmounted it! But the writing was not her father's, nor any other that she knew.

My dear Cyril, (she read)

I am pleased to hear you have got that regular job conducting at the cinema. . . .

She turned over quickly. At the foot of the following page she read:

. . . *So long!*
Your loving father,
John Marvell.

For one second, the blood beating in her brain, she stood fixed to the spot. Then, hurriedly, she slipped back the letter into the envelope, the envelope into the pocket, and stole from the room.

"Well, I thought you was never coming down," said the peroxide lady, with a giggle.

"I'm just going to the chemist's to get something for his head," Helena whispered.

"It's the heat, that's what it is," said the landlady wisely.

As soon as the door swung behind her she took to her heels and ran like a hare to the station.

"A single ticket to London . . . first-class, please," she said to the booking-clerk.

"You'd best hurry up, miss, the train's due," said the young man kindly.

Three weeks later the *Morning Post* announced: "*A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Viscount Ledwyche and Lady Helena Pomfret, only daughter of the Marquess of Barfreton, K.G.*"

Balalaika

THEY played, every evening, in the "Brasserie Alsacienne," at the angle of the Avenue Juels Ferry in Tunis, the corner from which electric trains go swinging out to Carthage across the ibis-haunted lagoon. They played there from six to eight. Somewhere about five-thirty the Arab boy who haunted the café and cleaned shoes on its terrace hurried from table to table with an ill-printed programme, backed by a few advertisements and many blank spaces where advertisements should have been. These programmes were headed: *Grand Concert Apéritif: Orchestre Russe des Balalaikas.*

They played, and nobody heeded them: neither the town Arabs, in white burnous and blue silk sock-suspenders, nor the French business men, with rosettes in their buttonholes that looked like the Legion of Honour until you saw the tell-tale Tunisian green, nor the fat Italian potato-growers, nor the lean American tourists. If you wanted music, you went to the municipal café of the Casino over the way. Here the customers didn't listen, the waiters swept pass them with flying napkins, the proprietor kept his eye on them and on the clock, to see that he got his money's worth, or

rather the worth of the scraps of food which he gave them at the end of the evening. From six till eight, and again from eight-thirty to eleven, the soft sentimental thrumming of their six balalaikas filled the café and its terrace with an undercurrent of sound that resembled the tremor of remote, harmonious cicadas.

No doubt they were genuine Russian refugees. North Africa, from Cairo to Tangiers, was full of them. And these were like the rest; thin, indolent, with high cheekbones, wide, supercilious mouths, and lank, ashen hair. Their manner cut them off from the rest of the people in the café as definitely as though they belonged to a distant and superior planet. They smiled, and talked together in Russian as though they despised us; they strummed their balalaikas as if they were just putting in time.

All but one of them. The exception was a little man with a yellow face and smooth, black, Tartar hair, who carried round the plate and shook it in front of us till we forked out *centimes*. When he had finished his collection he handed it carelessly to the chief of the band and settled down in a corner, his balalaika on his knees. He neither laughed nor talked nor smoked. He sat there, playing softly to himself a tune that nobody else was intended to hear.

I should never have heard it myself if a storm of February sleet had not driven me one evening into the interior of the café. There was only one vacant chair. It stood next to his; and as I finished my *Amer Picon* in a

hurry—I had no taste for balalaikas at close range—this faint, pathetic melody of his penetrated my brain, disturbed it, enchanted it. It was a little minuet, a figure of slight grace and beauty, so bright, so artless and so sweet that, when I left the café to dine, it continued to haunt me. Fragments of it stuck in my head; the rest was lost; and the loss was so irritating that I couldn't content myself until I'd made it good. Some old Italian, I thought; perhaps Scarlatti, or could it be Mozart?

After dinner I went straight back to the café. It was almost empty; but still, in the depths of it, the six balalaikas kept up their gentle irritating tune. When they had finished their piece my friend the secret soloist crept round and jingled his plate under my nose. I put in a franc. His eyes fastened on it with wonder rather than greed.

"That tune," I said, in French, "what is it?"

"The tune we've been playing? Really I haven't the faintest idea. Number twenty-three. You'll find the name on the programme."

"No, no, not that rubbish. I mean the tune you played to yourself."

"Ah, *that!*" he said. "You mean my Mozart?"

He bent over me for a second and began to play. The balalaika whispered so softly that no one else could hear. It was delicious, sprightly, with a queer formal grace. His eyes smiled with love as he played it.

"Yes, that's the bit I lost," I told him. "All the rest

I remembered. Do play it through again."

But the eyes of the leader were on him, and the eyes of the proprietor on the leader. "Afterwards," he whispered. As he hurried back I saw him displaying my franc as an excuse for his delay.

And afterwards, as he had promised, he joined me. We took coffee together; I offered him a cigarette. "Let us talk English," he said. "It is the same to me."

"I should have guessed Mozart from the first," I told him, "but the tune was unfamiliar, and since I pretend to know my Mozart pretty thoroughly I was puzzled. Where does it come from?"

"From a suite for string orchestra," he said. "It's not surprising that you don't know it. It's never been published, and now it never will be."

"Then how did you get hold of it?" I asked.

"The manuscript was in my possession."

"And isn't any longer?"

"I have no possessions in the world. Only memories."

"This sounds like a story?"

"Not an unusual one in these days . . . and in Russia."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me?"

"Not in the least."

It began in the usual way. He was a noble of Kiev. All Russian refugees, according to their own stories, are noble, and most of them seem to have come from the province of Kiev; but this one, I believe, spoke the

truth. A noble and a dilettante of music. He lived, as he told me, on his own estate of heaven knows how many *versts*, or whatever they call them. I'm sure he wasn't a good landlord, for he had been born a bookman and a musician. He had never married. He lived there quietly in his long music-room, amid the library of music-books and manuscripts that he had collected. That library must have been a delight; for, I can tell you, he knew his subject and had spent a fortune on it; so much, indeed, that he had never been able to gratify his extreme passion for a private string quartette. Apart from this he was happy, in a hermit, sedentary way, playing and poring over the scores in his collection with the snow-light outside.

Above all periods in music he loved the eighteenth century; above all musicians Mozart. And the principal treasure of his library was a volume of Mozart manuscripts which his agent had discovered in Vienna. The purchase nearly ruined him; he had had to bid against the German museums; but at last he got them and carried them back in pride to that sad country house of his. He had them bound sumptuously, he told me, in elegantly tooled leather, with his armorial bearings, poor dear, on the cover. Among these manuscripts was the Suite for Strings which contained that delicious minuet.

The war hardly touched him, he said. In the eastern part of the province there might have been no war, and, in any case, he was too old and too frail for soldiering.

Even the first outbreak of the Revolution left him undisturbed until the peasants completed what the town-workers had begun. He saw his district isolated by a blood-red ring of fire and rapine; but still he hung on; he thought he had no enemies. Then came the thing he called the Nakaz—the peasant mandate. He excused himself for troubling me with names:

“That was the decree,” he said, “which abolished the landlord’s ownership of land. It didn’t matter, in the very least, to me. All I wanted was to be left to myself and my music. As for the peasants, they knew I’d never done them any harm.

“But they went mad, you know,” he went on, his eyes widening, “quite mad. They were like a pack of wolves infected with rabies. In the middle of the night my bailiff—is that the word?—came bursting into my bedroom. A good fellow he was, but he was the one they’d got their knives into. ‘Vladimir Mihailitch,’ he said, ‘jump into your clothes at once; we’ve got to cut and run for it. They’re after both of us. Hurry up! No time to spare.’ He showed me a flare in the sky; they’d burnt his house already.

“I lost my head. You see, I’m not used to emergencies. ‘Wait one moment,’ I said, ‘while I get my manuscripts.’ ‘Manuscripts,’ he said. ‘Is the man mad? Money and jewels are all that matter; and for God’s sake be quick!’

“I tried to explain to him that the book was more valuable than anything else in the house. He began to

storm at me. I'm a nervous man, you know, and easily frightened. 'Books?' he said. 'Why, if you get away with your skin you'll be lucky. Money! Money! For heaven's sake come at once. Here they are!'

"It was true. We could hear their voices; they were beating on the door. I ran towards the library; he couldn't stop me; it was all my life. Then came a crash of glass. They were in, at the big window over the piano. He dragged me away. Just in time. Four nights in woods and fields. It was November, and a big moon shining that made the open country dangerous. I nearly died before we reached Kiev. Perhaps it would have been better.

"Then six months in the city itself. My bailiff was a clever fellow; quite right about the money; but even with the money we nearly starved. The peasants had got their land; it intoxicated them; they saw no need for work. Result, nothing to eat. No, I'll say no more about that. You've heard all this before. I'm not the only one.

"We managed to hide in the house of a small tradesman, the bailiff's cousin, he was. We slept three in a bed. Three? Three millions, upon my honour! You've no idea how poor Russians live. But it was warm, you know. I kept the bailiff's cousin's family going with the money I'd taken with me. I didn't grudge it them. You see, I'd really no further interest in life. I used to lie in bed all day, smoking and dreaming of my poor music-room; the book-shelves with the bindings going

mildewed, the Bechstein under the big window that went crash, the old violins on the walls. Will you believe it, I had an Amati? They were quite kind to me, those people. The bailiff's grandmother used to lie in bed with me for warmth. Quite proper. She was over eighty. You see, I was harmless and had plenty of money. They thought I was mad, and Russians are always sympathetic with madmen.

"My bailiff humoured me, too. He was an honest fellow, but still scared out of his life. All the time he kept on talking of plots and schemes to get me out of Russia: himself, too, of course. The idea was to work down south toward the Crimea and the Caucasus, and then. . . . You see the idea? He used to come and sprawl on my bed by the hour talking of the plans he'd made, all the possible outlets and the probable cost.

"I pretended to listen; he meant it all so well; but somehow it didn't excite me. My brain was numb; I'd left my heart behind in that room of mine. As long as it existed I didn't want to move. What's more, if it came to the point, nothing could move me. All that I wanted to hear was news . . . news. And there wasn't any. I suppose he was afraid to ask questions.

"'If you can tell me what's happened to my manuscripts,' I said, 'I'll discuss the Caucasus. Not before. I'm not going without them.'

"At last his thick brain seemed to realize that he could do nothing with me. He had to make an attempt. He got in touch with a peasant who came into the city in

one of my old suits. That was how he spotted him. The peasant was a stupid fellow and much too drunk to inform against him. My house, he said, had been looted and burnt; before they'd burnt it they'd carried away most of the furniture that wasn't too heavy. Good firewood, you know. As for the books, he knew nothing about them. He wasn't interested in such things. He couldn't read.

"*'Now, Vladimir Mihailitch,'* said the bailiff, 'you must see reason. Let's away while the money lasts.'

"*'If the furniture's been removed,'* I told him, 'it's quite possible that the manuscripts are still in existence. Probably they're somewhere in the district. I shall wait here till you find them.'

"He couldn't see my point of view. I suppose it was natural. He flew into a temper with me. Quite violent, he was! 'Throwing away your life and mine for the sake of those old bits of paper!' But he couldn't move me. Of course I was mad. 'If you find those books,' I said, 'we'll go to-morrow.'

"And the weeks went by. Our money was running away like sand in an egg-boiler. He used to watch me in such an odd way that I began to suspect he was planning to rob me. I hid the rest of the money in my boots. I'm afraid I did him an injustice. The poor fellow died later, in the Crimea.

"Then one day he came back to me flaming with triumph. 'Vladimir Mihailitch,' he said. 'I've found them! I've found them!'

"I jumped out of bed. I threw my arms round his neck and kissed him. 'Tell me, for God's sake, tell me,' I said.

"'I was walking along the street in the Jews' quarter,' he told me. 'There's a little hole there kept by an old Hebrew—worn clothes, brass candlesticks, scrap-iron, broken china . . . God knows what rubbish! There he was, sitting on a pile of books: handsome books, Vladimir Mihailitch, in leather bindings. Just a chance, thought I; the merest chance! So I scared the old black spider away and had a look at them. Never tell me again that there's no such thing as Providence! If I hadn't known them by sight there was your coat-of-arms. I just gave them a kick, to show how much I valued them. "What do you want for this old lot?" I asked.

"'He picked them up in his skinny fingers: "It's a beautiful binding," he said: "a very wealthy binding." I laughed at him. Believe me, Vladimir Mihailitch . . .'

"I could stand it no longer. 'Where are they?' I broke in. 'Where are they?' It was life and death to me. He treated me like a child.

"'Now be patient,' he said. 'One thing at a time.'

"'Then you haven't got them? My God!' He shook his head. I took off my boot. 'Here's some money,' I said. 'Take it at once. Don't lose a moment. It doesn't matter what you pay.' In my excitement I'd shown him my hiding-place. I saw his eyes glitter; but that didn't trouble me. He waved the money aside. 'Please listen

to me,' he said, 'and don't interrupt. There was this old Jew turning all the stuff over and over. "Costly bindings?" I said—I was clever, mark you—"What do I want with bindings? Bindings won't light fires. Let's have a look at the paper inside them." He handed one over to me: the book with the crest on the outside. It was like drawing a tooth. I opened it. Your manuscript right enough! "What'll you take for the lot?" I said. He screwed up his black eyes: "Fifty roubles?"'

"My bailiff looked cunning: 'You see, Vladimir Mihialitch, it wouldn't have done to jump at it?'

"'God in heaven!' I shouted, 'I'd gladly have given a thousand!'

"'Gently, gently,' said the bailiff. 'Why, if I'd accepted his price he'd have known that I wanted them for something better than fire-lighting. What's more, he might have picked up a few extra roubles by informing against me. No, no. I gave the books another kick. "I'll give you fifteen," I said, "and that's more than they're worth." "Make it twenty," says he, "and let me see your money."

"'And there he'd got me. I hadn't a kopeck on me! I asked him for credit. He laughed at me. You catch a Jew giving credit to a stranger! "Well, keep them for me," I said, "and I'll be back in half an hour." He wouldn't promise. I'm afraid he guessed that there was something behind it.

"'And at that moment, that very moment, Vladimir Mihailitch, a great lumbering lout of a *moujik*, came

along the street with a barrow. He saw I was after something, and wanted to see what it was. These fellows are full of money, you know. He stood staring at me. I was holding a book in my hand. It seemed to puzzle him to think why I was buying them. Then a bright idea entered his thick skull. He slouched into the shop, leaving his barrow outside, never speaking a word. He went straight up to the pile of books and picked up the one with the crest outside. Then he tore a page out of the middle and held it in his teeth while he routed in his pocket. The old Jew watched him. Nice thin paper, it was. Out came a handful of tobacco. He began to roll a cigarette, and lighted it from the charcoal under the old Jew's chair. One puff, and he'd made up his mind. "How much?" he said.

" "Thirty roubles the lot," said the Jew.

" "Wait half an hour and I'll give you forty," I said.

" "No waiting here," said the Jew.

" "The peasant didn't seem to hear us. He picked up the volumes one by one and threw them on to his barrow. Cigarette paper's scarce in these days. Then he pulled out a wallet stuffed with notes and planked down his thirty roubles. The Jew was on them like a hawk. The *moujik* went off with his barrow.'

" "But of course you followed him,' I said. 'You know where he went? Let's lose no time. I'll go with you.'

" "Followed him?' said my bailiff, with a laugh.

'Followed him? How could I follow him? Why, God knows where he was going. He'd got his bargain, and wasn't likely to part with it either. That's against the nature of the *moujik*. No, Vladimir Mihailitch, they're gone now. And if it's anyone's fault, it's yours. You're so damned stingy with your money, and that's the truth! If I'd had fifteen roubles in my pocket . . .'

"'God in Heaven,' I said, 'you can have everything I possess if only you find him! You know what he looks like and the way he went. He can't go fast wheeling a barrow loaded with books. Quickly, quickly!'

"The bailiff laughed at me. I think he must have been drinking. '*I can't find him; you can't find him; nobody can find him,*' he said. 'You don't seem to realize that all this happened five hours ago. By this time he's having a smoke in his own hovel or helping his wife to light a fire. But you needn't think I've wasted my time. I've better uses for your money than that. Listen. I know a man who can get us through to Odessa. If you've got all that money there's no reason why we shouldn't start to-night, now that you've got these blessed manuscripts off your mind. Come along, now, Vladimir Mihailitch, pull yourself together!'

"I didn't hear him. It was as if the roof of the sky had crashed down on me. I lay in bed and howled like a child."

He stopped. There were tears in his black, pathetic eyes. The waiter hung over us, expecting another order.

"Cognac?" I suggested.

"As much as you like. God knows I need it. I've never told the story before. It's brought back the misery of those days in Kiev in such a way. . . . You must excuse me if I can't control myself." He paused for a moment, sitting still with his head bowed in his hands. Then, suddenly, he recovered himself.

"You are an educated man, sir," he said. "Possibly you have read Turgenev? He wrote a novel. *Fumée*. Smoke. That was his best title. Everything in Russia ends in smoke—like my poor manuscripts."

The waiter placed our cognac on the table; I handed my friend his glass.

"Everything in Russia," he repeated. "In smoke, like my poor manuscripts, or in liquor, like myself. *Ah . . . Je m'en fiche, je m'en fiche!* Your health, sir!"

The Cage Bird

I

FOR story-telling there's one place that beats all others, and that is the ring round a camp-fire in tropical Africa. It affords no distractions. Even in a cosy library, with curtained windows and a coal fire burning, one's eyes will wander to the light that plays over the backs of books or watch the hands of a clock. In Africa you get none of these things to disturb you. The world shrinks into a little circle of firelight. Beyond the edge of it nothing seems to exist; and within it only the story-teller and his listeners.

But that isn't all: the men one meets in the scent of wood-smoke have generally something to say. There are few books in the bush-*veld*, and those mostly bad ones; but Africa is a country of full lives, and of these you only hear from the mouths of the men who have lived them. Great story-tellers! You sit and listen and the world drifts away from you. You're so held that the sputter of a green branch makes you jump. And then suddenly you see yourself sitting on your haunches, the glow of the fire, the fumes that sting your eyes; and all around you, in a haze of Boer tobacco (which

tastes like hay in Europe, but in Africa is the best smoke in the world), you see other listeners who have not awakened like yourself, but still inhabit the world of enchantment that you have just left. So you reach out for another branch to throw on the fire, or give the embers a kick. And the voice of the chap who is telling the story goes on and on and on. . . .

The best hand at that game I ever met was Charlie Murray, and he knew it. Get him after a dinner of grilled eland-steak and a peg of whisky, and he'd talk you to sleep: not because his stories were dull, but from sheer staying power. Murray was a tremendous chap. He rode sixteen stone, with long stirrup-leathers, like the Boers, so that his feet nearly touched the ground on either side of his rat of a hunting-pony. A tall, stiff figure, with shrewd blue eyes, a sun-bleached moustache, and cheeks dried like biltong: a dead shot, and the best of company.

When I knew him he had settled down to ranching on the edge of the Berg, which is the loveliest land in all Africa, and as lovely as any in the world. He knew that it was beautiful, and warmed when one praised it; but though his life was busier than that of most men of his age, he lived in the past. And such a past! African born—his father had been a Free-Stater—Murray had fought in five wars. He had seen the map of Africa shaken like a kaleidoscope, and helped to shake it. And yet he was no politician. He knew a man and esteemed him whatever his race or language—Dutch, Kaffir, or

English were the same to him, for he spoke them all. It sounds as though I'm digressing; but that isn't so. It is the fairness and sportsmanship of Charlie's nature that come out so clearly in this story of his childhood. You can hear it and say to yourself: "That's Charlie Murray all over!" From that day to this he has scarcely changed a hair's-breadth. "Give a man a sporting chance!"—that was Murray's motto in life.

II

It happened, as I say, when Charlie was quite a kid. They were living in Smitsdorp, a little town, important in its way, a few miles north of the Caledon River that marks the boundary between the Cape Colony and the Orange Free State. That is important to remember. His father was prosperous. Wool, I take it. Yes, it must have been wool; for I remember a story that Murray once told me. He was playing alone at the bottom of the garden with a little Kaffir, when one of the house boys came rushing down upon them, picked them both up—one under each arm—and ran off, shaking the life out of them, to the house. Murray remembered all his sins and thought he was in for a hiding.

But it wasn't that. The house was full of the big, side-whiskered men of that generation, talking seriously

together. All were armed, and none took any notice of Charlie.

Then came his mother, scrambling down the bamboo ladder that led to the loft, with a couple of old Dutch elephant-guns: brutes that would take a couple of ounces of lead and kick you into the middle of next week. When she saw him she gave a gasp. "Thank God!" she said, but she didn't kiss him. She told him to run and fetch a pot of mutton fat, of the kind that they used to boil down from the tails of sheep, to grease the guns with. When he came back she took it from him without a word, and the room was so full that he slipped under the table with a dog called Bles and the little nigger that had been snatched up beside him.

From this refuge he caught stray words of the men's conversation. They were talking about Moshesh—Moshesh and the Basutos. And then the farm boys came running in with great bales of wool with which they began to pack the windows, so that the house grew dark. He was frightened by the dark and the trampling; he hated the greasy smell of wool, and the dust under the table made him sneeze; so he crawled out on to the *stoep* at the back of the house and asked his special friend, a Cape boy named Klaas September, what it was all about. Klaas pointed to the hills, the great lion-coloured foothills crouching in front of the Maluti Mountains. "Kaffirs coming," he said. "Moshesh is a great king. They will crack your skull with their kerries like a snail-

shell, and put a sharp stick into your body. Look, you can see them!"

But all that Charlie saw was a number of black dots scattered over the mountain like sheep, and a few ponies moving along the skyline; and before he knew where he was his mother had found him again and hauled him in and put him to bed as a punishment for his wickedness and daring, in the loft where he and his elder brother slept. So he poked a hole in the thatch, and saw the men ride out from Smitsdorp. He heard shots fired and saw puffs of smoke on the mountain till he grew bored and went to sleep.

Next day the Basutos had gone, the bales of wool were carried back to the store and the windows washed clear of the grease stains the bales had made on them.

Another digression—but such digressions were the essence of Murray's stories.

Murray's father, then, was a wool merchant. Wool was his staple business; but in those early days a man of spirit took his turn at many things. He was also a solicitor, practising in the little Landdrost's Court at Smitsdorp. The Boers were a litigious race, and Murray's father generally had his hands full; for men who had to stand their trial knew that if they had a good case he would fight for them and that the bench respected him. Indeed, the two men with whom he had most to do in Smitsdorp were the magistrate and the governor of the gaol.

This last was a deplorable affair; but in that poor

country there was no money for a better. It was a great hollow square, like a cattle-kraal, with high walls of undressed stone and *chevaux de frise* of broken glass on top. The back of the building lay up against the side of a hill, so that the innermost cells were walled with red rock through which, in the rainy season, water oozed and dripped. The safest gaol in the Free State it was called. Certainly it was the most noisome, and for this reason it was the custom of the judges in Bloemfontein to send the more desperate criminals there to serve their sentences. Most of them were cattle-stealers or horse-thieves—for in both these games the border natives excelled—and the job was sufficiently profitable for a white man to lend them a hand.

And here comes the most remarkable thing of all: that in a Boer country, among a race that has always recognized a colour-bar, black men and white were imprisoned together. Murray's father had always protested against this; he had even induced the Smitsdorp burghers to petition against it; but the answer was always the same: the finances of the Free State wouldn't allow them to erect separate prisons; when more money came in other arrangements might be made. This troubled old Murray's mind. He knew that the gaol was a disgrace to the country. Whenever he went there he came back sickened with its filth and its darkness, full of pity for the chained savages inside. For they wore chains—a heavy ring round the neck, another for each ankle, and between them two lengths of half-inch

chain that clanked as they walked. At night they were linked together, four to a cell. For food they had nothing but a small ration of mealie-pap.

The governor of the gaol was a dark, violent Dutchman, a survivor of the Great Trek, who felt bitterly towards all living creatures, and respected nobody but Murray. He didn't live at the gaol. He knew better than that. He had his own farm a mile or more away, and rode over in the evening to see the prisoners when his other cattle had been kraaled. For the rest they were left in the charge of four natives: a Griqua, named April, and three Zulus, proud of their guns and their uniform, lazy and tyrannous.

Except in winter, when it was swamped, the gaol was badly supplied with water, and so it came into old Murray's mind one day that he might do himself and the prisoners a good turn by giving them a chance of a bathe in his dam. Rensburg, the governor, wouldn't have understood it as an act of charity, so Murray suggested that the prisoners might do an afternoon's work on his land before they bathed, and Rensburg, who was always ready to help a man who might be of service to him in the future, particularly when he could do so at the public expense, consented. Murray's suggestion filled him with admiration. It was a slim idea to get the work of twenty men for nothing under the guise of charity. Murray knew what he was about!

III

So Charlie Murray's story begins.

"At that time," he told us, "I was a boy of twelve or thirteen. The convicts used to come over every Saturday, and I used to watch them grinding up the hill, twenty poor devils, sweating their souls out! The Zulu guard used to walk behind with a rifle, and April, the Griqua, in front with a pipe in his mouth. When they got to the top they'd halt and stand there panting like blown oxen, waiting to be told the work they had to do. Then they'd drag off their chains into the fields. I remember how they used to make a rush for the dam—just like cattle—when the work was over, stripping off their coats and splashing the water up over their naked chests and faces. They'd some fine chests on them, too! April usually joined them, while the Zulu sat on the bank smoking, with his rifle across his knees. While the convicts were bathing they became different creatures. You wouldn't believe it! They laughed and splashed one another like a lot of kids playing, and shouted out their Kaffir jokes to the guard on the bank and to me. I used to answer them back in Kaffir, too. It struck me as rather fine to be making jokes with murderers—particularly as I'd been forbidden to talk to them at all!

"Every Saturday, somehow or other, I managed to

get down to the dam, and one day I got a surprise. I saw that one of the prisoners who had stripped along with the others was a white man. Earlier in the day, when they marched up, I hadn't noticed him. After that I kept on thinking of it, and when supper came along I couldn't keep it back.

"This afternoon one of the prisoners was a white man," I said.

"How do you know that?" asked my father.

"I saw them bathing," said I.

"Haven't you been told not to do that?" said my mother.

"But she, too, was interested. 'I thought all that was over,' she said. 'Didn't you speak about it?' She implied that if he *had* spoken about it, it was as good as done. 'Yes,' said my father, 'I did speak about it; but it's no good! They say they have no room anywhere else.' 'It's a scandal!' said my mother. 'Yes, it's a scandal, but we can do nothing.'

"No more was said about it, and for some weeks I saw no more of the white prisoner. Then, one afternoon, I came down into the orchard where the convicts were earning their bathe by cultivating in between the trees. I came down there for a special reason: I wanted a nest out of the top of an almond tree. Up I went, thinking myself no end of a climber, showing off a bit, because I knew the poor devils were watching me. Then I missed my balance and came down a darned sight quicker than I'd climbed; and the next thing I knew

was sitting up, dazed, with the white prisoner on the ground beside me. 'How be 'ee, son?' he said. 'A bit shaken up, I reckon. Was it that nest you were after?' I nodded. I didn't quite know where I was, but in another second that chap was shinning up the tree with his irons clanking on either side of him. He went up like a darned monkey. I'd never seen a man climb so quickly. When he came down he had the eggs in his mouth and handed them over to me. 'If that's what you want,' he said, 'you've come to the right shop. There's not a tree in the world that I couldn't climb, even with these damned things on.' I asked him why. 'Because I'm a sailor,' he said, 'and a sailor has to go aloft in a gale of wind that'd blow your guts out.' I'd never seen a sailor before, and told him so. 'If you don't believe me,' he said, 'look at this!' And he stripped his arm to the shoulder and showed me the tattooing of a dragon that he'd got done in China, with flames coming out of its mouth. And on his chest he'd got a full-rigged ship with all her canvas set. 'Not a sheet out of place,' he said. And he may have been right. At any rate, you could read the ship's name. *Alabama* she was called.

"After that we stayed talking for a bit. I'd never met a man in my life I liked better, and it was a rum experience, anyway, to be yarning with a chap that was doing time. I hoped he was a murderer; but he didn't look like one. I can see him now: a sturdy fellow with a broad chest—it had to be, to hold that ship—and

bright brown eyes like a bird's. He had a beard that grew right up to them, brown and curly without a grey hair in it, and a hooked nose peeling with sunburn. The guard was smoking at the other end of the orchard, and so we sat down under the almond tree and he began telling me yarns about places he'd seen all over the world, hunting whales, diving for pearls, doing all the things that boys like to hear about, but which had never come my way. In the middle of Africa in those days we didn't run to books, and Crang—that was his name—was as good as a library.

"He'd been everywhere, or said he had, and in any case, I believed him. And then suddenly he dropped back into talking about his own home in Devonshire—a place called Ditsam, if I remember rightly. My people never talked about England. My father had quarrelled with his parents and never made it up; he wanted to forget. But it seemed to me that boys had a much better time there than in the Orange Free State, tickling trout in the streams and bird-nesting in the hedges. I didn't know what a hedge was. There we sat talking and the time slipped by. And then, all of a sudden, I saw Crang rolled over from behind, and the Zulu guard kicking him as though he'd kill him. The brute had got boots on, too. Poor old Crang got mixed up with his chain and couldn't find his feet. When he did, he looked at me; and if ever I saw murder in a man's eyes I saw it that day. He never said one word. He just marched off to join the others with the Zulu black-

guard kicking him behind. If he had showed fight I believe I should have joined in. I cried about it that night, though I didn't dare tell my father. After seeing that look in Crang's eyes I made sure he was in for murder; and that was a point in his favour as far as I was concerned.

"So, next week I waited for him—they were still working on the orchard, and we had another talk. By gad! it was like a new world to me! I'd never been farther from home than Bloemfontein. The week after, I pinched some of the tobacco my dad kept for the Kaffirs, and gave it to Crang. It was a treat to see the chap chew! 'You've saved my life, son, and that's the truth!' he told me. It seemed to do him good to get things off his chest, to talk about the sort of life he led in the *tronk*, as the Boers call a gaol. That Zulu guard was a fair devil. You can understand it. The man was a savage by nature, and had no check on him; for Rensburg drew his salary for looking after the gaol and left it at that. If ever a white man suffered hell, poor Crang did. They slept four together in a hole like a pigsty. Crang lay at the end of the chain, next to a lousy Basuto horse-thief. You don't believe it? But it's true! This actually happened under the Boer Government of the Orange Free State in the 'sixties!

"Well, my heart fairly bled for the poor devil, and when I'd plucked up my last ounce of courage, I managed to ask him what he was in for.

"'Son,' he said, 'it's manslaughter; but I swear to

God I'm as innocent as a lamb!' To tell you the truth, I'd much rather it had been murder, and Crang guilty; but it seemed that he was merely serving a sentence of five years in chains. 'Five years,' he said, 'and only six months gone!' He told me that he'd have committed suicide long ago if he'd had the chance. He would have drowned himself in father's dam. The trouble was that he swam like a fish, and couldn't sink if he tried. 'I'd have done it at night,' he said, 'but what can you do when you're chained to a dirty Basuto? You couldn't bleed to death without waking him, and I haven't got a knife. Now what would *you* do, son?'

"I took it very seriously, but I was hanged if I could tell him. What I wanted to be getting at was the story of his crime, and so I begged him to tell me. 'Understand, first of all, that I'm innocent,' he said. And I told him I believed him. It was a long yarn. He'd deserted his ship at Port Elizabeth, as lots of men did in those early days of the diamond-mines, and had been tramping to Kimberley. On the way he put up for the night at a Jew store somewhere near Bethulie, and got blind drunk. That same night some Kaffirs broke into the store, killed the Jew, and left Crang asleep. Next day Crang woke to discover the murder. He was still fuddled, but sensible enough to make his way to the next farm and report the crime. The farmer was one of Landdrost's court, and Crang, instead of being thanked, found himself arrested. Everything was against him. The Kaffirs gave evidence. They had

heard sounds of a struggle in the night. And here was a desperate character, an English sailor, tramping to the diamond-fields with a fair sum of money in his pocket, and too drunk to know what he had done! It was lucky that they didn't make it murder. Five years in chains, and not a friend in the country! 'If it wasn't for the chains, son,' he said, 'I could bear it.'

"Now if there's one thing that shocks a boy it's the idea of injustice. I believed the chap. He'd cried like a child when he told me, and I'd almost cried with him. That night I had it out with my father; told him the whole story as Crang had given it to me. First I got a good hiding for having talked to him at all; then my father said he'd look into it. And he did. I knew he would, and kept quiet, waiting to hear what he'd say. That week I only saw Crang for a second. 'I've told my dad about you,' I said. 'God bless you,' says he, 'that was the luckiest nest that ever I took!'

"Next day my father called me up to him. 'Charlie,' he said, 'I've been looking into the matter of that man Crang. I've had his papers from the court at Bloemfontein, and it's just possible he may have told you the truth.' After that he went straight to old Rensburg and put the case to him. Then he got him to ride along with him to the *tronk*. They saw Crang together, heard his story, and talked it over. My father pointed out to Rensburg that Crang was the only white man in the place, and that it wasn't fair to chain him up to a Basuto and let him be knocked about by the Zulu guard. Rens-

burg saw the force of this, particularly when my father told him that this was the way to make the Kaffirs get above themselves. So they came to an agreement. My father made himself responsible for Crang. Crang swore on his honour that he wouldn't try to escape if he had his chains knocked off and was allowed to sleep in a pigsty of his own. And next time that they came to the dam I saw Crang without his chains.

"He just caught a moment to thank me. 'Charlie,' he said, 'I'll never forget what you've done as long as I live. I tell you, it's heaven!' Well, if the *tronk* at Smitsdorp was heaven, his life must have been pretty hellish before.

"And so it went on. Every Saturday we met and had a yarn: sometimes it was just a whisper. By that time I'd decided I was going to be a sailor myself! Great times we had. . . . Sometimes he'd talk about his life in the *tronk*; sometimes we didn't mention it; but all the time I knew that he was making a pretty rough passage with the guard, who had a down on him and could knock him about even though he wasn't chained. But Crang was a plucky fellow, and never grumbled. He'd had more than once chance of escape, and would have taken it like a bird if he hadn't given his word to my father. He told me so, quite frankly. You couldn't help admiring the chap, and so I used to do everything I could for him: slipping a bit of meat off my plate at dinner-time, or pinching a handful of tobacco and an old pipe of my father's. So two years passed. . . .

"Then we had a nasty knock. My father died. You'd never have thought it of a great strong chap like that; but the winters in the Free State are worse than anything you get up here. He got pneumonia, and wouldn't lie in. He had a case on, and his client depended on him. It was the worst thing I remember in my life; but it made a man of me. I was fifteen and the only son. We had only the farm to live by, and I had to shoulder the weight of it. You see, I was a big chap for my age. What's more, my father had made good friends, so that if it came to sales some of them would give a lift to my stuff, or let me in easy if I wanted to buy. It turned my head a bit, I don't mind telling you; but I worked like a horse for all that. I never saw Crang for weeks on end. I'd no time for listening to stories, and when Saturday came round and the convicts marched up to bathe as usual I was often twenty miles away.

"One afternoon I came across him in the same old orchard, and the sight of him gave me a shock. The man had fallen away to nothing. His nose was like a bird's beak, and his eyes sunk in his head. 'Well, Charlie,' he said, 'so you've forgotten me.' I flushed up properly. I hadn't exactly forgotten him, but I hadn't taken any trouble to see him. He came up closer, and I saw that one eye and all that side of his temple were black with a bruise. 'What have you been up to?' I said. 'It's that blasted Zulu,' says he. 'He's got a down on me, and so have all the others in the *trunk*.'

It's no good; it's one against twenty-three, and your poor dad's dead and gone. I'm worse off now than ever I was.'

"Then he came right up to me. 'Look here, Charlie,' he said. 'I gave your dad a promise. I've kept it. That's true, bain't it?' 'Certainly you've kept it,' I said. 'And now he's dead and gone,' he went on, 'that promise is still there. I don't want to put a slur on his memory. But this I tell you straight. I'm done. I can't go on!' I didn't need telling that, I could see it for myself. 'It's this way,' he said. 'I reckon you've come into your father's promise. If you want to bind me to it, I'm bound. But if you release me from it, I'm off. I think I can see my way to it.'

"I could say nothing. 'I'll ask my mother,' I said. 'Now, for God's sake,' says he, 'don't go and drag a woman into it! Just tell me this: am I free of my word? Will you give it back to me?' Well, what could I do?

"'Yes,' I said, 'as far as I'm concerned you're free.'

"'Thank God you're a sportsman, Charlie,' he said. He gave me a good old hand-shake. 'And now there's one thing more. Will you help me?'

"Well, that was a question I didn't wait to answer. A lad of fifteen doesn't think much about laws or things of that sort. I said 'Yes' at once, and asked him what he wanted me to do. 'Not much,' he said. 'I want you to give me a rough chart of the country and tell me a place where I can lie quiet for the night. Then I want you to put me up some food and a suit of your dad's

old clothes. That's all.'

"So we had a talk about the lie of the land and the course of the Caledon River. His idea, you see, was to get out of the Free State as quickly as possible, and the river was the boundary between it and the Cape Colony. We decided that he might spend the night in a poplar thicket at the top of our valley, four or five miles above the dam. There used to be a Boer farm there, but they just went north with their wagons, like they do, and left the place to go waste. Above the dam the hillside rises pretty steeply—it's almost a cliff—and we settled that next Saturday I should hide the clothes, with a loaf of bread and some *biltong*, at the top of it. 'Leave the rest to me,' said Crang; and at this the Zulu blackguard came up and we said no more.

"That next Saturday was the most exciting day of my life up to date. It was a blazing hot morning. I hid the clothes and the food at the top of the cliffs as we'd arranged, and then I waited in the bushes on the other side to see what would happen. The afternoon was a scorcher, too. The convicts came up and did their bit of work. Then the two guards marched them down to the dam. They began to strip for bathing. And I lay there watching Crang. You've got to remember that he was the only man without chains.

"He didn't seem in any hurry to bathe. I saw him at a distance, slinking round the edge of the dam like a dog that's got scent of something, and looking out of the corner of his eye at the Zulu who had the gun. It

was the best play that ever I watched. When the second guard saw the prisoners splashing in the water he couldn't resist it. He stripped naked, and went and flopped in, and the Zulu watched him. He was stretched out on the ground with his rifle on a rock a yard or two away. I saw old Crang hovering over that rifle like a hawk; but the Zulu had half an eye on it too, and there was nothing doing. It was a queer thing—you could see that nigger thinking of the cool water as he lay there in the heat. I kept on saying to myself: 'Why don't you get in, you swine?' It almost seemed as if by thinking of it you could make him do it. Know what I mean? Poor old Crang must have been thinking the same as myself. . . .

"Then suddenly the Zulu got up on his haunches and began to pull at his coat. 'It's coming,' I thought. 'By gad! it's coming!' Crank came a bit nearer, and the guard asked him why he hadn't washed according to orders. Crang slunk off again. I couldn't hear what he said. The Zulu began to rub his naked chest with his nails, like a great monkey scratching. Then he got up, and went to the edge of the water.

"It all came in a second. As soon as his back was turned Crang was on that rifle. The Zulu swung round. 'It's murder,' I thought, 'and if it is, I'm in it. Crang's a white man.' But there was no need for that. Crang swung the rifle in the air and brought it down on a rock, splintering the butt to pieces. That was his plan. All that he feared was that rifle. Otherwise he knew they

couldn't catch him. He was off like a flash, and the Zulu after him. Up the hillside, over the rocks—I've never seen a man climb like that in my life, and the Zulu wasn't far behind him. It was a pretty even match, for poor old Crang was weak with want of food. At the top of the *kranz* the Zulu was gaining. Crang stopped and picked up a big rock. He heaved it over his head. 'You black swine,' he shouted, 'if you move another yard I'll dash your dirty brains out!' He could have done it, and the Zulu knew. He stopped, and Crang went on up the mountain like a damn rock-rabbit. And there was I, forgetting that I was supposed not to be there, standing up above the bushes shouting 'Go it—go it!' at the top of my voice!

"I went home that evening more excited than I can tell you. I wanted to take someone into my confidence, but there was nobody but my mother, and I was scared of her. She was too good. Next morning at daybreak I rode up to the place where I'd hidden the clothes. They were gone. 'Well, that's over,' I thought. 'I've finished with Crang for life.'

"Of course you know the proper end of this story. Crang ought to have died a millionaire and left me his fortune. Well, he didn't, or you may bet your soul I shouldn't be here this night. For a year or two I often thought of him; and then he went right out of my mind. A good deal happened in those years.

"We sold the house and farm at Smitsdorp. After my father died there was no point in living so near the

town. We moved to a new place sixteen miles away from the dorp. When I was eighteen I fell in love with my first; and that's quite enough to keep a man's mind busy.

"One evening—I can't even tell you the year—I was ploughing. None of your tractors in those days! I'd sent the niggers off to the compound, and went on ploughing, myself, right up to sunset. I wanted to finish a patch for the mealies, and as I ploughed I was thinking of Bessie so that I hardly knew what I was doing. I went round and round that field so that by sunset there was only a narrow strip left. 'Well,' I thought, 'I may as well finish while I'm about it.' There was a moon, you see. So I gave old Scotland a flick with the whip and told him he'd got to finish it. You could talk to that ox like you'd talk to a dog.

"All through that last half-hour I saw that there was a fellow watching me on the edge of the ploughland. I noticed him specially because you might go for six months without seeing a stranger on our new farm. I wondered what he wanted, though I'd no intention of stopping my work to ask him. When I'd finished I left the plough where it was and started driving the span of oxen home; and then he came to meet me; a little chap, dressed all in black, like a shopkeeper, with a billycock hat on his head and a little black bag in his hand. He came up to me and took off his hat. I guessed he wanted to sell something and was ready to turn him off. 'Is this Mr. Charles Murray?' he says. 'That's my

name,' says I. 'Well, you've grown away, Charlie!' he said.

"I laughed. 'And who might you be?' I asked.

"'Don't you remember me?' says he. 'No, I don't,' said I. Then he stripped off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, holding out his arm. I thought the chap was mad. 'Take a look at this,' he said. Then I saw it was tattooed with a great dragon. 'By gad!' says I, 'it's Crang!' 'Crang it is!' said he. 'I thought you'd remember me, son.' I took him by the arm. 'You'd better come along to the house and have some supper,' said I. 'No, son,' says he, 'I daren't do it. This is the Free State, and there's a warrant still out against me. But I'd like to have a yarn all the same.'

"So I left the oxen to graze, and we two sat down on the *veld* and talked in the moonlight. It was a queer story he told me. After he got clear of the guard on that Saturday afternoon he had gone to the poplar grove where we'd settled he should hide. In the middle of the night he'd come back for the food and the suit of clothes. And then he had a stroke of bad luck. I told you the stuff was hidden at the top of a cliff? Well, in the dark, poor old Crang missed his footing, fell twenty feet and smashed his arm. A fine old business for a man as weak as he was! But he stuck to it, and he got his clothes, and the next night he struggled across country somehow or other to the Caledon River. And there he had another bit of bad luck. The river was in flood, and he had to swim it, broken arm and

all. He must have been pretty near dead when he reached the other side.

"And here comes the funny part of the business. He had to get his arm mended somehow or other; there was no hospital nearer than Aliwal North; and, if you'll believe it, the only hospital there was the gaol! Out of one gaol and into another! I tell you we had a good laugh over it! But that gaol was a British one, and heaven to him after Smitsdorp. They looked after him finely for a couple of months and turned him out cured.

"Then he went down to Port Elizabeth and got work of some sort. He saved a bit of money—Smitsdorp had cured him of the drink for life—and set up in a coal and wood business on his own. He must have made a pretty good thing of it: money was easier to make in those days; but the man could never get the diamond-fields out of his mind. So, just before I saw him, he'd sold up the business and trekked off again, going this time by the coach that used to run from Port Elizabeth to Kimberley. That coach passed through Smitsdorp; and when he saw the old *tronk* on the side of the hill, he had remembered me and felt it his duty to let me know he was alive, and to thank me. That shows you what a good sort he was; for, as he said, the warrant was still out against him. He went to the hotel in Smitsdorp, and there he found out that we'd left the place. But that didn't stop him. He walked a good sixteen miles over the *veld* to find me, and he did it, as I've told you.

"I asked him if I could help him with money; but he opened his black bag and showed me that it was crammed with bank-notes and gold. 'I'm a rich man,' he said, 'and in Kimberley I shall soon double it.' I shook my head, but there was no stopping him. 'It's a fine moonlight night,' he said, 'and I'd better be getting on my way.'

"So we shook hands. 'You'll see me again, son, never fear,' he told me. 'I'll write to you from Kimberley.' It was a funny thing to see that little chap, with his black bag, moving off into the dusk. When I was just losing sight of him he turned and waved to me. I've never liked any man better in my life.

"That was the last sight of him, and the last I ever heard. He never wrote to me from Kimberley. Perhaps he lost all his money and was ashamed. Perhaps . . . I don't know. . . . At that time the Kimberley diggings were about the most unhealthy place on earth. They used to get a kind of malaria or typhus—they called it 'Diggings Fever'—and men died there like flies. I dare say that was what happened to poor old Crang. Well, he'd had a good run for his money; he'd thanked me for the little help I gave him, and he'd got to Kimberley. He'd always told me that his chief ambition was to find a rough diamond, and that, when you come to think of it, is about the best name you could give him. I reckon we'll have another pipe and turn in. . . ."

Armistice

IF there's one day in the year more than another my wife can't abide it's the Eleventh of November. She calls it a black-letter day: like our last of the seaside, the one when Jim's school-bills come in, and the one when I get my Income-tax Demand Note. On these days, she says, my barometer goes down bump from *Changeable* to *Stormy*. But November the Eleventh, the anniversary of the Armistice, is the worst of the lot. On that day, for the last ten years, I've made it a habit to go out to dinner with George Hollins and talk over old times. As for barometers—there's one thing that ours doesn't point to on these occasions, and that's *Very Dry*. Well, if we *do* celebrate a bit, that's our business, I say, and nobody else's. If anyone's earned the right to do themselves well old George and I have.

Of course, Maggie can't see it. She's been brought up that way—too refined. The first thing she asks herself about everything is what people will think. A man is known by the company he keeps, she says, and George Hollins is vulgar. Well, war, as I've told her a hundred times, makes strange bedfellows. As for that, we shouldn't have got married ourselves if it wasn't for

the war. You couldn't make the World Safe for Democracy, like George and I did, without being democratic yourself. What really sticks in her throat is George being a sanitary plumber. She says he's no class—which means that when I have to go to church in a frock-coat and carry the plate round, old George reads the *News of the World* and smokes a pipe in his shirt-sleeves. As a matter of fact, in the war, it was just the other way round. Old George was a sergeant—and let you know it—while I was a lance-corporal; and as for us having nothing in common, as Maggie maintains, well, when George and I were prisoners in German East we had something in common with a vengeance, and that was one shirt. Whenever I start telling people the story of that shirt Maggie gets uneasy. She says the subject's in very bad taste and had better be buried. That, as I tell her, is what ought to have been done with our shirt. But when it comes to George Hollins she simply can't see a joke.

Well, joking in good taste or bad taste apart, there's one point on which I'm firm, and that is my evening out with old George on Armistice Day. If Maggie doesn't like it she can lump it, I tell her, and she knows that I mean what I say. This year was the tenth anniversary—you'd hardly believe it—and George and I had fixed up to meet at a pub downtown for a short one before we went out to dinner. Thanks mainly to Maggie I hadn't set eyes on the old devil for months, and it did my heart good, I can tell you, to see his

honest face again. There he was, with all his medal ribbons stitched on to his waistcoat. Of course, I don't do that myself, Maggie says it isn't good form, but if anyone has a right to, old George has. Well, anyway, women know nothing about war, as I say. . . .

We sat down, and we had a double whisky to start off with, and George asked me how Maggie was, which only shows what a good heart he has, when you come to think of the sniffy way she's treated him. We felt a bit strange just at first, not having seen each other for so long; but after we'd ordered another it began to feel just like old times—us talking Swahili, the lingo they speak down there, and all the old jokes popping up as fresh as paint. By the time we were ready for dinner and set off arm-in-arm down the street we were so far back in the thick of it that it wouldn't have surprised me if I'd seen a giraffe poke its head round the corner lamp-post. Those giraffes were a bally nuisance in East Africa, you know; the brutes used to carry away the field-telephone wires round their necks.

This year George had found a new place for dinner he said. It was kept by a Swiss, and the proprietor was a friend of his, because George had done him a favour by fixing him up in a prompt and business-like way when his water-pipes froze and burst. He had a lager on draught, this chap, and, say what you like about the Boche, he can brew a good beer. George had asked him to make us a German meal, smoked sausage and sauerkraut, out of sentiment, like, just to remind us of the

time we were in prison, though, God knows, he and I didn't get much to eat except mealies in those days. Still, it was a bright idea of George's. He may be a plumber and all that, but the chap has a vein of what you might call poetry in him.

We sat down at the table together, and I must say the food, though foreign, was first-rate. Then, when once we'd got going, we started in, like we do every year, trying to remember everything that happened on the day we were taken prisoners. Pretty rotten at the time it was, I can tell you; but when you come to look back on it, after nearly twelve years, you can't help seeing the humorous side.

You see, in those days, George and me were in the Mechanical Transport, driving lorries and box-Fords from the base, at a place on the Tanga Railway called Korogwe, down to the front where Smuts and the South Africans were. We used to average about two miles an hour. There weren't any roads—not what you or I would call roads. The troops that went down in front of us had cut a sort of track through the bush—great thorn-trees, with spikes on them up to six inches long. Then, what with the trampling of the soldiers' boots and the wheels of the bullock-carts and the guns and limbers, a strip would get flattened out in the sandy soil. Red sand. . . . Don't I know it! Why, sometimes the wheels of our lorries would get stuck ten hours at a time, so that we had to wait—buried up to our axles and scared stiff of lions, if you want the truth

—until some other blighter rolled up and dug or towed us out. And even when we got going again, as you did with luck, the radiators of those old lorries would boil the way you could have made tea at any moment, if you'd had any tea to make. I can tell you that driving a lorry through German East, with the sky grilling above you and the engine boiling underneath was next door to hell!

And so damn lonely, too! It's hard to imagine it now, when you go into business by the eight-fifteen every morning in a carriage so crowded with "seasons" that the odds are you can't find a seat. Lonely? Why, often, when you stopped for the night in the bush, you wouldn't be far out if you guessed that there wasn't another human soul within forty miles of you. There weren't many native villages in that part—too much malaria—and all the niggers that happened to be about had cleared off, because the Boche—the "Germani" as we called them—had cut down or burnt all their crops so that the enemy—that's us—shouldn't find any food.

Not a soul within forty miles! It got on your nerves—on mine more than George's. We used to rig up a tarpaulin at night as a sort of tent, and sit smoking native tobacco, to keep off the mosquitoes, and talking about home. And then, when you stopped, that silence would bear in on you. Lord, you could feel the emptiness of it—hundreds of miles! And later, when you tried to sleep, you'd hear something worse than silence:

the bodies of animals slinking through the bush, and the old lions snuffing round. You see, all that country was stiff with lions in those days, because hundreds of the South African's horses had died with fly and horse-sickness—your nose didn't half tell you that!—and since our columns and the Germans' between them had scared all the game away, the brutes used to pick up a supper of gamey horse-flesh to keep them from starving. They were welcome to all they could get as long as they left *us* alone. But then, you could never tell the moment when they wouldn't fancy something fresher in the human line. So we used to build a sort of fence—a *boma* they called it—of thorn, and light a fire of brushwood to scare the brutes off. Even if it hadn't been for the lions, I can tell you, we should have needed a fire. For though we got roasted by day we pretty nearly froze at night. I tell you, it's not a health-resort, isn't German East Africa!

Then water . . . Well, that was the most important of all. The lorry-engines got so hot, with the sun, you know, and ploughing through sand, that they drank it up all the time. There was always the chance that your blessed bearings would seize. We had to treat water as if it cost more than champagne. You see, when old Smuts went off chasing the Germans southward he had no time to spare to think about details of that kind. The whole of that country's about as dry as a bone—just muddy water-holes, here and there, near the villages. The cavalry had gone down in front of us,

drinking up everything; so when we chaps came along afterwards there was nothing left but stuff like moist coffee-grounds. We had to filter it through a cloth before we could put it in the radiators. You people who can turn on a tap don't know your blessings! As for drinking—we had to remember that the engines came first; we couldn't touch a spot till we knew that the radiators were filled. I give you my word, we used to dream about water, old George and me. Honest Injun, we used to dream about it!

Let's see . . . Where was I? Ah, water. Of course. On the way from our base to the front there was one place—M'bagwe, they called it—with running water. Well running is hardly the word. I suppose it had once been running, before the cavalry got at it. At any rate, just near the track that the army had made, you could see the course of a stream—the only one, as far as I know, in all that damn country. By the time we got down there it was pretty nearly dried up—a series of deepish puddles among the rocks; anyway, enough to fill up the radiators and water-bottles and have a good drink as well. And that was how George and I came to have one shirt between us.

Wait a bit . . . I'll explain. When we got to that place one evening, I'm telling you the gospel truth when I say I hadn't had a wash for nearly a month. So I said to George: "Sergeant," I said, "I'm going to take a bath." "And who's going to drink it," he asked, "after you've done that?" "Well," I said, "it's good

honest dirt, as clean as the horses anyway; and if you want a drink, Sergeant, you'd better look sharp about it."

He didn't like it at first. In those days we hadn't got intimate as we were later, and George was a bit puffed up with his sergeant's stripes. However, when he saw me splashing about like a hippo in the mud, old George got off his high horse. "Here, don't stir up the mud," he said, "I've a good mind to try it myself. Anyone would imagine, from the way you behave, that that river was your private property." "Come on, then," I said. "Judging from the colour of your face, a wash wouldn't hurt you." So old George, he sat down on the bank and began to strip off his shirt, like I'd done, and, just at that moment, the damn Germanis appeared!

There were four of them: one white officer and three black *askaris*. They used to send out little patrols like that to lay landmines all down the road. You never knew when you and your lorry wouldn't be blown sky-high!

"Hands up!" says the white man, pointing his rifle at George. He was taking no risks, that blighter, although, if he'd had one eye, he could see that neither of us was armed. Of course I knew we were dished—not an earthly chance! I can tell you, I felt pretty helpless, all stripped to the waist.

"Wait a mo', sir," I said. "I'll come quietly if you'll let me get my shirt."

"Shirt?" he says. "We've no time for shirts! Look sharp, get a move on!"

From the way he spoke English you'd never have thought him a German.

In two seconds old George and myself were tied up together. It was no use arguing, and this Zahn—that turned out to be his name—was in a hell of a hurry. No wonder! You see, any moment, another of our convoys might come along the road and mop him and his party up just as he'd mopped up us. He told the *askaris* in German what to do with us. While they marched us off into the thick bush, Zahn went back to the road. He didn't give another thought to my shirt; but, a moment later, we knew what he was thinking of when we heard two explosions, which meant that he'd blown up the lorries. I tell you straight, I could have burst into tears when I heard them. I'd driven that old bus for three months; she was like my own child, in a manner of speaking; and, apart from a bit of play in the big-ends, as good as when she left the works at Coventry. I thought about Herr Zahn, at that moment, as if he were a murderer . . .

The next twenty-four hours were just about as bad as anything I can remember. Those niggers of Zahn's went hareing like mad through the bush, and George and me had to keep pace with them. We must have travelled a good thirty miles through the day and the night; and I tell you that that's no joke in the African bush when you haven't a shirt to your back and your

arms are roped up!

I can't say I blame Zahn for that, mind you. After all, we were a small party, in the middle of enemy country. We had to go fast and quietly, miles out of our way, to avoid the South Africans, and slip in, so to speak, behind the German lines. Old George never spoke a word the whole way; he just went sulky. But I knew what he was thinking, all the same, from his looks: he was thinking it was all my fault. Which it was, in a way. If I hadn't left my rifle in the lorry and gone off to bathe, it's quite possible that Zahn's patrol wouldn't have dared to attack us. Anyway, George had a shirt, and I hadn't. I used to remind him of that later on when he started blaming me.

Well, to cut a long story short, we got there eventually. To the German lines, I mean. We both had a pretty thin time, the Germans questioning us about the numbers of troops and the names of the units on lines of communication and that. They tried to starve us into telling them everything. I was thankful that George and I had had a good drink at that water-hole. The officers, on the whole, weren't so bad—they acted like sportsmen as far as a German *can* act like one, I will say that for them. It was later, when they sent us down the line to a place called Morogoro that we got to love the Germans as men and brothers. I tell you we did!

You see, just as luck would have it, Zahn got promoted. I suppose they considered him smart for having

nabbed me and George, though really it was easier than shooting a sitting rabbit. Anyway, we hadn't been five days in the prison at Morogoro when Zahn was put in charge. And then we knew all about it!

To begin with, having captured us with his own hands, he regarded me and George as his private property. Then, George, who, being a plumber, is naturally independent, had a special knack of getting Zahn's goat, and then leaving me to take the consequences. And Mr. Zahn took it out of us to some purpose, I can tell you.

He was a typical German under-officer—well, typical?—By that I mean the kind you used to see caricatured in the newspapers. He wasn't very hefty; in fact I'd say he was on the small size; either George or me, given our hands free, could have knocked the stuffing out of him. But he had a head that went up straight and square, back and front, and hair like a nail-brush, and rather short-sighted eyes. It was because of his sight, I suppose, that they'd sent him back to look after prisoners; that also was why it had been such a score for him capturing us. I've met some good Germans, mind you; but Zahn would have been a nasty bit of work whatever country he'd belonged to. What he lacked in impressiveness he certainly made up for in truculence; and in that prison, I can tell you, he was just as much boss as Satan in hell.

He had lived in England, it seemed. That's why he spoke the language so well. What's more, he had had

a bad time of it there, or imagined he had. He didn't say what he'd been, but George reckoned he'd been a "boots" in a hotel or something of that kind. Anyway, whatever he'd suffered in the way of kicks and humiliations he was glad to get back now he had us two in his power. He was clever as a monkey, too—oh yes, Mr. Zahn had brains—he must have kept awake at night thinking out ways in which he could put it across us. He seemed to know, as if by instinct, just where our corns were—particularly George's.

I can't tell you all he did to us. Some of it seems too petty now, and some's too disgusting. He'd got a revolting mind, had Mr. Zahn. It was even too much for George; and George, as I've told you, is a sanitary plumber by trade. All that sort of thing. . . . We were the only Englishmen there, mind you; all the rest were Indian Sepoys that had been captured earlier; and there was nothing that wasn't particularly humiliating to an Englishman that Zahn didn't put on us.

Injustices! Lies, too! I never met anyone who could tell a lie better than that blighter. He half made us believe that the British Fleet had been sunk at Jutland; that London had been bombed from the air and reduced to ashes. He made poor old George begin to get anxious about his wife. Well, whatever was happening in London, the Germans were losing in Africa. We knew that when, a few weeks later, Morogoro was evacuated, and we had to clear out with them. We were glad of that, anyway; for the barracks where they kept

us were only fit for natives, and we thought when they sent us back we should get clear of Zahn.

Not a bit of it, though! It seemed Mr. Zahn was a permanency. You'd almost have thought he'd taken a special fancy to us two and asked for the privilege of keeping us by him, for company. When they packed us off south, he went with us; and when, a bit later, four other white prisoners, South African Dutchmen, arrived, the brute took the opportunity of making it hotter than ever for us—partly, no doubt, because George, as I've said, got his goat, but mostly because we were English and he wanted to show off before the South Africans.

Things came to such a pass, in fact, that the day before the Germani were forced to abandon us—the place where they'd stuck us was surrounded and friend Zahn only got away by the skin of his teeth—on that very day George and I made a solemn compact: we took an oath, we two, that if ever, when the war was over, either of us ran up against Zahn we'd make it our business to kill him and damn the consequences. Quite serious, mind you. George felt even worse than I did. He said if he spent every penny he'd saved, he'd go to Germany, to a place named Oberhausen, where Zahn came from, and finish him off, the same as you would a snake. I can tell you that Zahn had got properly on both our nerves.

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Well, this night at dinner, we were talking it all over, bringing it back again, as we do every year on Armistice Day. It's a queer thing how time alters everything. Ten years makes a lot of difference. All the dangers and hardships of those old days in Africa—the lions and the sun and the mosquitoes and the sand in your throat—we seemed to have forgotten them. Not forgotten, but almost remembered as if they'd been pleasant. Somehow it's only the good side of those times that comes back to us now—the cool air in the morning, the minty scent of the bush, the smell of a wood-fire at night—little things like that. There must be something queer about Africa that gets you. Here was George, on his own, doing well at his trade, and me in a first-rate billet, with prospects of a rise, both of us married, too, as happily as one can reasonably expect—and yet, do you know, our hearts just flew back to Africa!

“War or no war,” said George, “I'd go out there to-morrow if I had the chance.”

“And so would I, I'm damned if I wouldn't!” I told him.

“Those were champion days, Will,” he says, “when you come to look back on them. I must say I enjoyed that war, son, though it sounds blasphemous to say so.”

“Well, there's one thing you've forgotten,” I told him.

“What's that?” he says.

“Why, Zahn,” says I.

"Old Zahn? That blighter! *Have* I . . . ?"

"D'you remember the compact we made? How you swore you'd spend your last farthing on tracking him down when the war was over?"

George laughed. "Well, he *was* a swine. There's no denying it. D'you remember how you and me used to scrap about who should have first go at him if ever we got the chance?"

"Don't I half!" I says. "Well, if there's a God in heaven he's probably dead by now. Still, if I *did* meet him, I'd rather not be Mr. Zahn!"

We went on talking like that for a long time. The food wasn't bad, as I've said, and the beer was first-rate. We got so engrossed that we never noticed the place emptying till there was nobody left in the room but ourselves and a waiter clearing up the tables. He made such a clatter with his plates and knives that it looked like a pretty good hint to us that it was time to go.

"Don't take any notice of him," says George. "I'm going to stick here till closing-time."

"It can't be far off that now," I said. And just as I spoke the clock struck. The waiter came up in a hurry and cleared his throat.

"If you don't mind, gentlemen," he said. Then he stopped: "God in heaven," he says, "if it isn't my old friend George!"

"That's my name," says George; "but who the devil are you?"

We didn't have to look at him twice. That waiter was Zahn!

If that wasn't a knock-out! I wondered what George would do. I shouldn't have been surprised if he'd picked up a table-knife and stuck him, there and then. But George was like me—too flabbergasted to move or speak. In fact it was Zahn who spoke first, as cool as a cucumber.

"I thought I'd seen you chaps before," he says. "But, you know, I'm short-sighted. I never thought to set eyes on you two again. It's a small world, isn't it?"

The nerve of the blighter was too much for both of us. George looked ugly first. Then, suddenly, he burst out laughing.

"You devil!" he says. "Have a drink?"

"I don't mind if I do," says Zahn. "The boss has gone home. Just you wait, while I shut up the shop."

And he went off to pull down the blinds and lock the door.

"What are you going to do about it, George?" I asked.

"Do? What *can* you do?" says George. "You can't knock a fellow out when you've asked him to have a drink with you."

A moment later Zahn came back with three big pots of beer. He was smiling all over his face, as innocent as a lamb.

"Look here, this round's mine," he says. "Here's to old times! *Prosit!*"

And he emptied his mug like a man. "Now it's my turn," I said.

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So, to cut a long story short, we made a night of it, George, Zahn, and me. Well, we had a good bit in common, when you come to think of it. We went through it all over again, from the day when Zahn nabbed me without my shirt by that water-hole at M'bagwe; and I must say old Zahn enjoyed it as much as we did. He felt just like we felt, he said, about Africa. He'd go back there to-morrow, if the chance came his way, he said; but his old boss, the Swiss—the chap whose drains George had put right—had offered him this head-waiter's job, and he couldn't refuse it. You see, though his parents were Germans, he'd been born in Switzerland, at a place they call Berne, so there wasn't any difficulty about his getting a Swiss passport.

"And if I can't go to Africa," Zahn said, "I'd as soon be in England as anywhere. You see I've married a girl here," he said, "you must come round some Sunday and see her. There's no friends like old friends," he said; and we had another round on the strength of it.

I suppose it was pretty near one o'clock in the morning by the time we'd finished. George and Zahn, they insisted on seeing me all the way home; and Zahn, who in spite of his eyesight, could see better than either of us, very kindly found the keyhole and opened the door

for me. Before he and George went off arm-in-arm we made an arrangement that we'd all meet again and talk over old times next Armistice night. And, mind you, I must confess I look forward to that. When you come to think of it, we're all of us human, thank God!

Knight Errant

BUT for the astonishing cheapness of that excursion to Boulogne, it would never have happened. Its seductive invitation to "A Sunday in La Belle France" at the price of a Sabbath in a gloomy English seaside resort had opened up such a vista of exotic adventure that Jimmy Marler (Mr. James Marler—representing Spengler's Dog Biscuits) could not possibly refuse it at a moment when business had providentially stranded him for a lonely week-end in Folkestone. Until the moment when that tempting advertisement flashed across his eye, Jimmy Marler had not dreamed of the chance of setting foot in a foreign country. It offered him, at a price that seemed quite ridiculous, not only a novel experience, combined with the delicious risk to his morals—which were unexceptionable—of visiting a notoriously immoral country, but also the opportunity of telling the chaps in the office on Monday morning, quite casually, that he had "popped over to France during the week-end" and of embellishing the announcement with a reticence that would hint at the most flamboyant indiscretions. In any case, he told himself, his wife, Matilda, would trust him. This act of daring might even open her eyes to

romantic possibilities in himself which she had never guessed.

In its early stages the adventure had gone swimmingly. Mr. Marler had crossed the Channel with the gallant air of Columbus crossing the Atlantic. He had observed authentic Frenchmen being quaintly and undeniably French. He had eyed—perhaps not without timorous hopes—the ankles of genuine Frenchwomen. He had drunk, at lunch, a whole bottle of *vin ordinaire*. And then, just as he was rosily congratulating himself on the triumph of a provoked but untarnished virtue, the Channel fog had dropped down like a blanket on everything. The steamer, they told him at the jetty in their queer English, could not sail till it lifted.

“But I have to be back in London on Monday morning,” he explained. In vain! The French, as a nation, he decided, were unsympathetic.

So now Jimmy Marler sat kicking his heels in the lounge of the Hôtel Folkestone—he had chosen it because the name was so reassuringly English—and settled down to a desultory conversation with the bored *concierge* and the Continental edition of the *New York Tribune*. It was not exciting. The *concierge* himself discouraged his attentions with looks of angry bewilderment. Jimmy Marler had almost decided to go down to the quay and make further inquiries, when the lady with the dog and the gentleman in the fur-coat appeared, and he changed his mind.

Not because of the dog, which was a pallid and

tremulous Pekinese, nor yet because of the gentleman in the fur coat, who was obviously Jewish, but because the lady, who was the physical antithesis of Matilda, happened also to be of the physical type to which, in his most extravagant dreams, Jimmy Marler aspired. She was taller than himself, very dark, ineffably slim; her clothes were undoubtedly Parisian, elegant, expensive. Her voice was low; her speech clear-cut and rapid. Her eyes were fiery and dark—the kind of eyes that, in novels, can “wither at a glance.” At the moment they were engaged in withering her companion.

Mr. Marler found himself, in short, spectator at a first-class quarrel, in which this dark and obviously passionate creature was treating her sardonic companion with a scorn which, Jimmy decided, he richly deserved. The attitude of the gentleman in the fur coat was brutal, unchivalrous. It made Jimmy Marler’s blood boil to see how he treated her. There was an ugly, foreign look in his eyes. At any moment, Jimmy felt, it might become incumbent on him as an English gentleman, to intervene and protect this splendid creature.

Of course it would be difficult to intervene, because, to begin with, they were speaking French so quickly that Jimmy hadn’t the faintest idea what they were quarrelling about. He could only gather that the distressed beauty was annoyed by the presence of her companion. “*Je m’en vais . . . Je m’en vais*” . . . she repeated. He got that all right. But then she would cry: “*Fichez moi la paix!*” And that, alas, was beyond him. Still,

on general principles and on the strength of the fact that she was ravishing, alone—or rather, worse than alone—and in distress, Jimmy felt it his duty to sit tight and see what would happen. The *concierge*, who no doubt understood what they were saying, seemed as bored with their quarrel as he had been with Jimmy's inquiries. Mr. Marler's manhood protested against such an unchivalrous attitude. Perhaps his help would never be needed. But one never knew! He sat with clenched fists, ready to spring to the rescue.

Suddenly, it seemed, the dispute reached its culmination. The lady cried "Basta!"—a word which to Jimmy's shocked ears sounded somewhat unladylike—then, raking him, as he sat, with a magnificent but impersonal flash of her black eyes, clutched the Pekinese in one hand, an elegant valise, that looked like a jewel-case, in the other, and swept, like a dark tornado, out into the fog.

The gentleman in the fur coat threw up his arms, entreating Jehovah—presumably—in a spate of foreign imprecations. Then he shouted at the *concierge* for telegraph forms, and began to scribble telegrams. And then, just as Jimmy was wondering whether it wasn't his duty to follow her and offer his services, the melancholy syren of the Folkestone boat came booming through the air. Jimmy pulled on his overcoat with a sigh and left the foreigner scribbling. "If I'd only had the nerve," he thought, "I might have butted in." Right down to the boat, through the lifting fog, regret

pursued him. This story of the impulse unobeyed, the occasion missed, the romance frustrated, was only too typical of all his life's experience.

Half an hour later, as the steamer groped its way cautiously through the remains of the fog, Jimmy Marler's romantic imagination was still pursuing, as was its habit, the broken thread of the story, elaborating what might have happened "if he'd had the nerve." He saw himself, a heroic, magnified Jimmy, defying the villain in the fur coat with firm words, straight from the shoulder—that exquisite dark creature sheltering behind him. He saw himself brusquely picking up her valise and telling her to come away with him. And though where she was to go with him remained a problem which even his exalted imagination couldn't solve, the picture was satisfying and chivalrous as far as it went, and would doubtless, with a little elaboration, impress the office on Monday. He would have to modify it, a little, he felt, when he told Matilda. Indeed, it would be better, perhaps, not to tell Matilda at all.

He sat down on a bench. The day had been full of excitements. It would be wise, he thought, to snatch a few moments of sleep. Banishing those visions of distressed beauty and chivalry from his mind, he closed his eyes. Thank the Lord, if he snored, Matilda would not disturb him! Then, just as he was on the point of surrendering to this stertorous luxury, he became aware of something moist and soft touching his hand. "A

cat," he thought dreamily; "they always have cats on board; the captain invariably rescues them when a ship goes down." He opened his eyes. It was not a cat. It was a dog. It was a Pekinese. Great heavens! It was *the* Pekinese!

He pulled himself together quickly and hoped that he hadn't snored. She was sitting there, on the opposite bench, a few yards away from him. For the moment he could scarcely believe it was really herself. All the fire and magnificence had gone from her black eyes. She sat there demurely, almost pitifully. Beneath her astonishing elegance she now looked little, pathetic, cold. But always and ravishingly desirable. His heart beat faster. The adventure was not over. It was only beginning. A helpless foreigner in England? Why, he, Jimmy Marler, carried England—so to speak—in his pocket! Though she hadn't seen him yet, and, probably, in any case, wouldn't recognize him as the man who had been waiting in the Hôtel Folkestone, he did his best to encourage the small dog's overtures. In vain! The flavour of his fingers had apparently proved unattractive.

Then Jimmy Marler had an inspiration. It was his habit, on his travelling rounds, to carry in his pocket a handful of Spengler's Puppy Biscuits, which are warranted to intrigue the appetites of the most fastidious toy dogs. He extracted one and offered it to the Pekinese, who snuffled, devoured it sideways like a cat, then sat up and begged for more. At the same

moment, providentially, she looked up, saw what was happening, and smiled.

"Spengler's," he said—for his instinct never neglected a business opportunity—"Spengler's Puppy Biscuits. You can't go wrong on those."

"*Pardon?*" said the lady.

"Spengler's Puppy Biscuits," he repeated, more loudly. "This Peke of yours is a beauty, madam. I haven't seen a finer specimen in years. And, mind you, that means something," he added proudly, "me being 'in the line,' so to speak."

"I am sorry," she said, with a delicious foreign rolling of the 'r.' "I didn't recognize your English. I speak it so little."

"Well, you can't go wrong with Spengler's, though I say it as shouldn't." Mr. Marler laughed nervously: "Going to England yourself?" he enquired. Which was foolish, as he quickly reflected, seeing that they were already in mid-Channel. "Pardon me," he corrected himself. "Of course we're all going to England. London, I suppose?"

"Yes, London I suppose," she echoed. Her low voice was exquisite. Then her eyes clouded suddenly. "*Feng . . . Viens, viens!*" she said.

For an instant the Pekinese turned to her, then swivelled his bulging eyes towards Jimmy's biscuit.

"They won't do him any harm, madam," Jimmy repeated. "As a matter of fact . . ."

It suddenly struck him that the nature of the occupa-

tion which he was on the point of disclosing was not sufficiently romantic as an introduction. For one second he played with the idea of representing himself as a prominent breeder of Pekinese; but this flight of imagination failed in mid-air, and he found himself saying:

"If you're a stranger to England I can give you any help or advice; as a native who knows England backward, so to speak, I shall be only too pleased . . . As a family man," he added hastily.

She said: "Thank you." But the tone, though gracious, was not encouraging. He felt, in fact, that his offer had been dismissed.

"Not at all," he replied. Then, awkwardly, feeling that there was no more to be said, he got up, raised his hat, with an elegant, foreign courtesy, and walked away. In the back of his mind he had hopes that Feng would follow him. But Feng was securely held by the slack of his neck, and nothing followed him but the sound of a snuffle and the glance of a pair of wistful, bulging eyes.

"So that is the end of that!" thought Jimmy, resignedly. "Well, nobody can say that I haven't tried to be helpful."

But strangely enough, that wasn't the end of it; and for this, even more strangely, the Pekinese was responsible. All through the crossing Jimmy Marler had kept his eye on her—not rudely, but with a tender,

gallant solicitude. It wounded his English heart to think of anyone so lovely, so unprotected, disembarking in England on such an indefinite errand. She was unhappy, so much he knew. He knew also the cause of her unhappiness.

Supposing that, in her distress, she were forced to appeal to some stranger, less scrupulous, less chivalrous than himself—to someone who wasn't, in short, a family man? On the gangway he found himself by accident (almost) close behind her. She recognized him, and, as she did so, clutched Feng and the valise more closely. Her glance of recognition froze him. He couldn't even offer to carry anything for her.

And then, at the Customs' barrier, his moment came!

As he emerged, triumphant, unimpeded by questionable baggage, he saw her struggling in the toils of a Customs official, who was trying to explain, not too tactfully, that dogs were not allowed to enter England; that every imported animal was subject to a six-months' quarantine. Like a knight-errant, with pennon flying, Jimmy charged into the fray.

"I know this lady," he said boldly. "She happens to be a friend of mine."

"And who are you, may I ask?" said the Customs officer.

He presented his card. "You see, old man, I'm more or less in the dog line myself. Spenglers. That's good enough, isn't it? Here's my name and my business

address. If there's any expenses for keep, I'll be responsible. O.K.?"

The officer nodded grudgingly. "Nothing else to declare?" He routed in the valise, discovering nothing to Mr. Marler's dazzled eyes but a collection of night-attire, in no way resembling Matilda's.

"Now, madam," he said, "we're all through. The dog'll be all right, you take my word for it, bless his little heart. If you're going to catch that special to London you'll have to look slippy. Allow me!"

Superbly he possessed himself of the valise. Bewildered, but obviously grateful, she followed in silence. "My word, what a walk!" Jimmy thought, as they crossed the platform.

"Got your ticket?" he asked.

She shook her head. Thank heaven, he had enough—though barely enough—to pay for it. The guard bundled them into a first-class compartment and slammed the door on them.

"Now where are you going to in London?" Jimmy asked courageously. "Got friends there, or a hotel?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "A hotel, I suppose. I have no friends in England." So much the better! "I only decided to come," she went on, "an hour ago."

"I know that," he answered darkly. "*And* I know why. I saw what happened at Boulogne. Never mind. I'll see you through. You can trust me."

"You have been so kind already," she admitted. "How can I thank you? But now, of course, I must

pay you for the ticket. I'm afraid I have only French money. I left so hurriedly."

As she fumbled in her handbag a look of blank surprise came into her eyes. "My money!" she cried. "It has gone! Some pick-pocket!"

He might have guessed it! And yet her distress seemed genuine.

"Oh, never mind that," said Jimmy Marler, magnificently. "In for a penny, in for a pound," he thought "By Jove, what a beauty!"

"But I cannot, I cannot let you do this for me! It must be somewhere!"

She turned the bag inside out in her eagerness. It was at this point that the revolver fell to the floor.

A loaded revolver! Jimmy Marler picked it up gingerly. He had never himself handled anything more deadly than an air-gun.

"Give that to me," she cried. "Give it to me! It's all I have left. That is my last resource!"

"You bet I will," said Jimmy. He slipped it cautiously into his pocket.

She grew angry. Her eyes flashed splendidly as he had seen them flash at Boulogne.

"Give it to me," she said. "You have no right to keep it."

"The police," he said. "You can't carry firearms in England without a licence. Just like dogs. You'll be getting into trouble before you know where you are. Now look here, ma'am," he went on, with increasing

confidence, "you'd far better make a clean breast of it."

"A clean breast? What do you mean? Why do you pester me like this?" she cried, with sudden terror. "Who are you? Ah, you needn't tell me. I know his ways. He has paid you to follow me! But I warn you, I warn you now, that if you continue to molest me, I shall call the police."

The shadow of possible blackmail fell on Jimmy's heart; this adventure was taking on a sinister colour. Well, honesty, as he had always maintained, was the best policy. He took out another of his cards and handed it to her.

"Spenglers," he said, with simple dignity. "That's what I am. If you want to know any more, I'll be pleased to tell you. I'm a family man, as you might say. Number sixteen, Courtfield Crescent, Brixton. Quite near the Crystal Palace. If you're in trouble, as it seems, the wife and myself will be glad to offer you hospitality. And if you're not mad, you'll take it."

"Who knows if I am not mad?" she sighed forlornly.

"All the more reason," he said firmly, "why you should come with me."

She laughed, for the first time, and looked him full in the eyes.

"Very well," she said. "I will come with you."

It was a triumph. Never had he experienced such a sense of power and elation; never, he reflected, since the day when Matilda had accepted him. Matilda . . .

It was the thought of Matilda that took the wind out of his sails. Till that moment he hadn't considered the difficulties into which his rash gallantry had betrayed him or the courage that would be necessary to carry the matter through. To bring home an unknown and exceedingly beautiful foreigner, whom he had picked up, in romantic circumstances, on a Channel crossing! And at midnight! His spirits collapsed like a pricked balloon. "I haven't half bitten off more than I can chew," he told himself gloomily. "However, I may just as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb!"

Nothing, indeed, could have been more lamb-like than his companion's behaviour, on the way out to Brixton. They caught the last train by the skin of their teeth. It was long past midnight when they reached Courtfield Crescent. Jimmy saw, by the light in the window, that Matilda had gone to bed. The sight made him shiver and congratulate himself at the same time. The bad moment had come!

He opened the door with his latchkey: then whistled, with a false nonchalance. Matilda, in a cretonne overall, appeared in the kitchen doorway. She looked sleepy, bored, and not over-pleased to see him.

"What, Jimmy? Is that you? I thought you were staying in Folkestone till Monday," she said. Then her eyes fell on the figure standing beside him. They hardened. She gaped. "Now I'm for it!" thought Jimmy. He said:

"Look here, Matilda, I've brought a young lady along."

"Young lady?" she gasped.

There was only one thing to be done; to treat the whole thing as a casual matter of course. "She's a stranger. It's no joke arriving in London at midnight, not knowing a soul. So I brought her along with me here. I knew you wouldn't mind."

"Wouldn't mind! I suppose the hotels were all closed," said Matilda sarcastically.

With a smirk of apology to his guest Jimmy bundled his astonished wife into the sitting-room.

"Look here, it's all right," he explained. "Honest Injun, she's had her purse stolen."

"Tell that to your grandmother," said Matilda scornfully. "Purse stolen, indeed! Then how did she get those clothes, I'd like to know! James Marler, if you bring that woman into the house by one door, I go out at the other. That's straight!"

In a hurried whisper Jimmy explained what had happened. The scene in the hotel at Boulogne. Matilda's face stiffened. "*Boulogne?* I should like to know what you were doing in Boulogne?" Jimmy told her about the excursion—"Just thought I'd pop over, like"—the fog, the Pekinese, the Customs House. As a proof of his seriousness, he finally produced the revolver and showed her that it was loaded. At this she softened.

"Well, what's done can't be undone," she said. "It

may be as you say. You couldn't turn out a stray dog at this time of night. I'll see what I can do for her. But you, Jimmy Marler," she said, "the less you have to do with her the better. You leave her to me. You get right off to bed, and then there'll be no misunderstanding about it," she added, threateningly.

Matilda's attitude, at any rate, could not be misunderstood. Even this grave humiliation was better than an open quarrel. Summoning all the dignity of which he was capable, he stepped out into the passage.

"My wife will look after you, madam," he said. "I hope you'll be comfortable. Sleep well—pleasant dreams!" he added, with daring familiarity; then climbed the stairs slowly, feeling more like a slapped child than the hero of romance which he had imagined himself an hour before.

The week that followed was the nearest thing to hell that Jimmy Marler ever remembered. In it, Matilda's careful hands stripped from him, one by one, all the attributes of romantic gallantry which he had so boldly accumulated. She contrived this process of his humiliation with an almost devilish ingenuity. It began the next morning, when, after a night of obstinate cross-examination, Matilda discovered him carelessly slipping on his Sunday clothes.

"Here, come out of that," she said brusquely. "Anybody would think you were going courting instead of to the City."

At breakfast this torture was continued.

"Now, Jimmy," she said, "put your napkin up! I don't want to spend the whole day sponging porridge off your waistcoat. It's no use pretending you're the Duke of Westminster all of a sudden."

When he hurried to the station to catch the eight forty-five, he found she had cruelly sequestered his best hat. His self-esteem was a mass of smarting pin-pricks. Whenever he assured himself, as he tried to do, that he was the heroic victim of a grand and melancholy passion, the memory of some new and petty indignity stabbed him awake.

"I'm darned if I'm going to put up with it," he told Matilda that evening. "What I want to know is this: Am I the master of my own house?"

Matilda only smiled.

And so it went on. You might, Jimmy thought, have supposed that treatment of this kind would arouse the fair one's pity, poor substitute as that might be for the warmer emotion which, by all romantic canons, she owed to her rescuer. In protest he adopted an air of injured tenderness and nobility. But Matilda soon knocked the bottom out of that.

"Don't take any notice," she told their guest, "if he happens to touch your hand when he's passing the butter. He's quite harmless, is Jimmy, and even if he does like to dream he's a Don Juan, that doesn't take *me* in! I know him! We haven't been married six years for nothing."

"Oh, haven't we?" said Jimmy, darkly. "That's

where you're mistaken!"

"Just listen to him!" laughed Matilda. "He hates you to think he's been faithful. Isn't he just a lamb?"

And the object of Jimmy's frustrated passion merely smiled. She was always smiling. The tragic figure of the Boulogne boat, the distressed beauty of the Customs House, the vision of pathetic loveliness whom he, James Marler, had swept off her feet with such manly magnificence, no longer existed. Those grave, impassioned dialogues which he had imagined taking place under the romantic towers of the Crystal Palace had never materialized. She was gay, she was childish, perhaps she was even more beautiful; but her gaiety, her childishness, her beauty were not for him. When she sat down in the evening at the piano, and sang Neapolitan folk-songs, in a voice which, to Jimmy's ears, seemed more exquisite than any on earth, it was to Matilda, not to himself, that she looked for approval. Within a couple of days they had even begun to call each other by their Christian names. Her own was Alda. If anyone in that house had a right to call her Alda, it was himself. As a protest, he refrained from doing so.

In the course of a few days Mr. Marler began to feel so disgruntled that he took to avoiding his own home. There was only one adequate answer to such ingratitude. He went off to a pub, drank much beer, and hoped they would miss him. They didn't, apparently. That was the cruellest part of it. In the begin-

ning Jimmy Marler had been distressed by the fear that his wife would be jealous. Now he heartily wished that she would be. He had imagined, courageously and fondly, that he and the stranger would be on one side, Matilda on the other: that it would be his duty and privilege to gather her into his protection, if not into his arms. And now the accursed freemasonry of women had betrayed him. He was forced, as an outsider, to listen to their whispered confidences, to see their smiles—even to witness their embraces. And he couldn't help feeling, all the time, that the object of their whispers and their laughter was himself. She was only a foreigner after all. He might have known it. Treacherous!

Matilda, who saw his gloomy looks, only scoffed at them.

"The funeral will leave the house at half-past two," she would say. "No flowers by request. Now, Alda, give us a tune."

And Alda's gay voice would break out in a *tarantella*.

"Oh, don't we enjoy ourselves, Jimmy!" Matilda would say.

At the end of a week Mr. Marler decided he had had enough. Returning from his bath with a grimly-set face and shaving soap in his ears, he confronted Matilda.

"Look here, I'm about fed-up," he said. "I'm not going to put up with any more of it."

"Any more of what?" Matilda demanded sleepily.

"This woman," he growled, "this Alda, or whatever you call her. She can't hang on here indefinitely."

"Well, *I* didn't bring her here," said Matilda, truthfully. "What's wrong with the poor girl? She makes company for me. Don't be selfish, Jimmy."

"And who's going to pay for her keep, I should like to know?"

"Well, if that isn't mean! The poor kid eats next to nothing."

"Look here, Matilda, I'm going to be boss in my own house. That's straight enough, isn't it? Either that woman goes, or I go. Have you got that?"

"I seem to have heard those words before," Matilda smiled dreamily.

"That may or may not be," said Mr. Marler emphatically. "But before I catch the eight forty-five"—he looked at his watch—"I'm going to give that young woman a bit of my mind."

"Don't go wasting too much of it, Jimmy." Matilda yawned like a cat.

Descending to the breakfast-table Mr. Marler steeled himself to his unpleasant duty. With a foreigner you never knew; there might be a scene. In any case he was thankful to know that the revolver was locked in his writing-desk, and that the stainless steel table-knives weren't over-sharp. There was more in his mind than that. The coming scene would bring down the curtain on a drama which, though it had

lapsed into farce, had allowed him, in its earlier scenes, to strut the stage as a hero—a strong, silent hero whose stern exterior hid a core of unique and passionate romance. The celestial dramatist had played him a shabby trick; but, even now, the beauty of the heroine had power to wound him. Perhaps, in this final scene, her eyes would flash fire; perhaps they would fill with hot tears as she confessed that, in spite of all her feigning, she loved her preserver. For that reason, profiting by Matilda's sleepiness, he had negligently donned his best suit. . . .

That morning the sitting-room seemed set like the scene in a theatre. He waited for the guest to appear, almost hoping, in spite of himself, that Matilda would turn up first. The clock showed a quarter-past eight. He had no time to spare. Matilda came bustling in.

"Why, you haven't begun! You'd better buck up, or you'll miss your train, Jimmy Marler."

"I was waiting," he began.

"Oh, do get on with your breakfast!" And she rudely pushed a flabby fried egg on to his plate.

The clock pinged half-past eight. They were still alone. Fantastic conjectures began to flash through his mind. Perhaps she had heard his ultimatum; the walls were thin! Poison . . . My God! He went red in the neck.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Jimmy?" Matilda asked coolly.

"You know what I'm waiting for," he said, "I'm waiting for *her*."

"Well, you'll find somebody else waiting for you at the office if you're not careful. If you want to speak to Alda you'd better go up to her room and see what she's doing. You have my permission," Matilda added maliciously.

"You can keep your permission," said Jimmy angrily. He went upstairs, only realizing at the last moment that his napkin was still tucked in his collar. He threw it down over the balusters, viciously, then knocked. There was no answer. *Poison*. Once more the dreadful word tormented him. He flung the door open violently. The room was empty. He ran downstairs, told Matilda what he had found.

"Empty? You don't say so!" she answered nonchalantly. "Well, in that case, since you've missed the train, you may as well go upstairs and take your Sunday suit off."

It was the one occasion in all his married life on which Mr. Marler came within an ace of becoming a wife-beater.

Afterwards he was glad to think that his anger had stopped short of that. When he returned to Brixton that evening Matilda was sweeter than honey. Without actually saying that she was sorry for the trick she had played on him she made amends. She was almost the Matilda he had taken to Ramsgate on their honey-

moon, so gay, so affectionate, and so tactful that she never, either then or later, referred to the events of that bewildering week.

Mr. Marler himself preferred not to think of them. He turned his back full on that ruined castle in Spain. It had almost disappeared from his bruised memory when, six months later, he received from the quarantine authorities a bill for expenses and notice that a Pekinese dog was at his disposal. He paid the bill grimly, and presented the dog to Matilda. Matilda adored it. It was "company" for her, she said. But Mr. Marler never hinted at the creature's origin.

Another six months—and there came to him, care of Spengler's, a bulging letter that bore an American stamp. It contained nothing but notes for four hundred dollars, a press clipping and a signed photograph of a woman arrayed in the opulent satins of Tosca. The newspaper clipping read thus:

After the sensational quarrel with the direction of the Paris Opera, the diva precipitately took the boat for England. "I had nothing but a nightdress and a revolver," she laughingly confessed, "and was more prepared to use the second than the first. On the boat," she went on, "I had a romantic encounter with a distinguished Englishman who, with true knight-errantry, came to my rescue. This friend in need discovering that my money had been left behind—I had only enough in my purse to pay the fare to Folkestone—took me

home to his wife, the most kindly woman imaginable. I stayed in their luxurious home for a month, at the end of which they most kindly financed me. To them, more than to any living souls, I owe my tremendous success at the Metropolitan. I assure you that on that evening when I arrived in London I was as near dying of starvation as Mimi, in "Bohème"—my favourite rôle, by the way. But for these kind folk you Americans would never have heard of Alda Serena." When asked if she considered that American Opera surpassed the highest European standards. . . .

At this point the clipping ended. Mr. Marler re-read it. Then, solemnly, he tore it and the photograph into fine fragments. The bills he put into an envelope which the office boy, bribed with sixpence, directed to:

Mrs. James Marler,
16, Courtfield Crescent,
Brixton.

Then he went out and drank a pint of beer.

"Romance . . ." he said. "That's what I call Romance!"

Orange Blossom

I

IN the long library at the Manor House, the only part of it which wasn't quite obviously devoted to sporting pursuits, Morton Stone prowled up and down like a caged panther, fretting at the leisureliness of the medical consultation that was being held in his wife's bedroom, just overhead. He was a strongly-built man, with hair just retreating from the temples, clean-shaven cheeks, a firm jaw, and grey eyes, which the ruddy tan of an open-air life made almost blue by contrast. He looked, in fact, what he was—an English country gentleman, a man who had lived the admirable life of his class intelligently and with unemotional steadiness.

As he prowled and listened his face looked pale and anxious beneath the tan. It was only when a stir of footsteps and lowered voices in the corridor warned him that the two doctors were approaching that his features stiffened into their habitual calm. They entered, the family doctor making way for the specialist; they advanced, with a sinister, smiling assurance, designed, Morton felt, to put him at his ease.

"Well, what is the verdict?" he enquired abruptly.

The verdict? It wasn't, the specialist implied, quite so grave as all that. The case was not unusual—nor even complicated; he was only there to confirm the opinion which his colleague had already expressed.

"You see," he explained, "this trouble dates back a long way. Doctor Harris tells me that when your wife lost her first baby, some years ago . . ."

"Seven," the family doctor interpolated.

". . . seven years ago, yes," the specialist blandly repeated, "there arose some symptoms of the mischief which is troubling her now. Your wife, if I may be frank with you, isn't an easy patient. Colonials—particularly South Africans—are apt to resent discipline. Her passion for hunting—I gather you're a Master of Hounds—has led her to take risks. The early morning cub-hunting in autumn. . . . And then, this poisonously wet winter! No doubt she's neglected some chill, and is paying for it. Still, now that the season's over that temptation will be removed; and with care, and the line of treatment on which we've decided, and warmer weather—" The stream of soothing platitude continued to flow; the great man was anxious to give full value for money. "I think," he concluded, as he negligently folded Morton's cheque in his wallet, "I think you'll be well advised to take her abroad next winter. In the meantime, Dr. Harris will keep an eye on her."

And Morton also kept an eye on her—anxiously,

pitifully. . . . This complaint, however slight it might be, had begun to play the deuce with Catherine's beauty, stealing the bloom of youth from her cheeks, painting dark rings round her eyes, making her approach those domestic tasks which, in the past, she had taken in her stride, with an unusual impatience; rendering her—although she didn't know it, and he wouldn't let her—occasionally tense and irritable. "Well, well," he told himself, "we're not as young as we were. That is the condition of marriage—growing old together. But the devil of it is that I am not growing old."

He consoled himself for the change with a sense of virtuous satisfaction in his own forbearance. There was a new element of *noblesse oblige* in their relations. Even admitting that their love had lost its first rapture he had no right to forget her consistent devotion. Now that she was no longer herself, it was his duty more than ever to make an equal return. He did so, conscientiously; but that summer was not a happy one. This suspended life grew irksome to his strenuous tastes; and over all hung the threat not only of sinister developments, but also of that winter abroad—the prospect of lounging away the best months of the year in some deadly southern resort, a thousand miles removed from his beloved hounds.

Summer faded, and now the problem grew urgent and imminent. The doctor had passed from hints to stringent orders. They should be out of England, he insisted, before the first frosts. Morton broke

the news himself to Catherine.

Quite typically, her first concern was for him. She was feeling a little weary, she confessed—not so eager as usual for the hunting to begin. But Morton, poor dear, she knew, would feel quite lost without it. Wasn't there hunting, of a sort, in the neighbourhood of Biarritz—and spring salmon-fishing, for that matter, in the Pyrenees? Perhaps, if they made enquiries, it mightn't be so bad after all. Or supposing, if it came to the worst, that she were to go south alone?

Morton couldn't, with self-respect, take advantage of such generosity. However aggrieved he felt, he was bound to go with her; he had no intention, he said, of being separated from her. This assertion brought its reward of tender gratitude in Catherine's eyes: a small mercy, for which he was thankful, and even proud.

They had almost decided, for want of something better, on Biarritz, when Hans Malan arrived. Malan was an Afrikander, a cousin of Catherine's. A swarthy, lumbering figure, simple-minded and kindly; a man who had lived strongly and dangerously through his forty-odd years—as soldier, as hunter, as prospector, and latterly as farmer—he had travelled to England to dispose of some platinum claims which he had discovered in the Northern Transvaal, and came to visit the Stones as his only English connections. Morton was thankful for his coming. He liked Hans Malan for himself, as a manly man; a man who had lived, a man one could trust, he decided. The fellow's hard direct-

ness appealed to similar elements in his own nature—a disarming gentleness overlying a core of granite.

He was glad Hans had come, again, for Catherine's sake. Of late he and she had been thrown back rather heavily on their common resources, and the strain on their limited store of these, sport excluded, was beginning to tell. Hans Malan brought with him the air of a wider world. He was keen, he was shrewd, he was wise in a way that startled and refreshed them. It did Morton good to see her eyes brighten when she and Hans sat smiling together over memories of their African childhood—queer characters they had known, wild escapades, strange landscapes, family legends. There was even, between them, the standing joke of a boy-and-girl love-affair: very passionate and enthralling, no doubt, at the time, but now, down the vista of years, almost humorously pathetic.

"You may laugh," Hans confessed, when they teased each other, "but I'm still unmarried. I've always been waiting to find another Catherine, and to meet the lucky fellow who carried her off."

"Well, now you have seen him, Hans," she said, with a tender, proprietary glance at Morton. "I do hope you think he'll do," she added mischievously.

"Oh yes, he'll do all right," said Malan, scanning Morton with serious eyes.

He would have to do now, Morton thought, as far as she, poor dear, was concerned. There was something piercingly pathetic in the little flashes of coquetry that

lit Catherine's eyes when she remembered this ancient conquest. Dead loves, he reflected gloomily, were deader than most things; and if the memory gave her changed self any pride or pleasure, he couldn't grudge her either. Already, after three days of Hans Malan's company, Catherine was another woman. Her zest for life returned miraculously. By his mere presence Malan had lightened her spirits. He was so sound, so sane, so refreshing, that they welcomed the chance of referring their problems to him.

"But why Biarritz?" he said at last. "Why not South Africa? Don't you honestly think," he asked, "that this is what Catherine is needing? A return to her native air! Whatever the doctors may say, there's a lot in that, Stone. Why, haven't you noticed how she brightens up whenever we speak of it? As for you, I'm ashamed to think that you've never seen South Africa. The sun..."

"Ah, the sun!" Catherine sighed. "We poor things never see it, Morton. The sun, and the space; the dry air blowing off the Karroo! And the orange-blossom... Heavens! I can smell it now!"

"Besides," Malan urged, "if it's only sport that you're wanting, what could be better? Our fishing and shooting are first-rate. We might even trek up to Louis Trichardt and inspect my platinum. Look here, just make up your minds, and we'll call it a bargain. I've bought an old farm in the Cape—Catherine knows it quite well—it was built by a forbear of hers in the eighteenth century. There's an empty cottage just on

the edge of my orange-groves, fifty yards from the house, at the end of a camphor-tree avenue. Settle down there, and stay for six months, until England gets tolerable. No domestic worries for Catherine. Little Daphne, you know, is really a splendid house-keeper."

"Daphne . . ." Catherine mused: "Little Daphne! Only to think of Daphne's keeping house for anyone! Daphne!" she explained to Morton, "is Hans's half-sister. I think of her still as a child. It's quite ridiculous."

"Not a thought, not a worry, you see," Malan went on. "I'm sailing next week. If you people will come on by a later boat I'll have everything ready for you. Now I'm serious, remember!"

Malan was always serious.

"Shall we go?" Catherine asked. Morton knew she was burning to go. Even if his spirit hadn't leapt at the opportunity, as it did, he knew that he couldn't have stopped her going.

II

The name of Malan's farm was Meerlust—Sea-Gladness, to give it translation. It slept in the arc of the Hottentots' Holland Mountains; two solemn white wings reaching out on either side from its gabled entrance; in front a long *stoep* of small, richly

weathered bricks, from which an avenue of gigantic camphor-trees led to the converted wine-store in which the Stones slept. About that cottage there brooded a woodland silence; the land breeze, at dawn, came to them faintly tinged with the smell of camphor-leaves: a pungent odour of camphor-wood diffused itself from the fire that the Cape girl lighted to heat their bath-water (the admirable Daphne saw to that); and when they stepped out on their way to breakfast the bright air was penetrated by gusts of orange-blossom.

Issuing from their bedroom Catherine and Morton would pause for a moment on the *stoep* to inhale this intoxicating perfume, gazing, raptly, down the vista that pierced the oak woods towards the shining sea. Meerlust . . . Sea-Gladness! That old Dutch settler had an ear for the rightness of names! And there they would stand, till Daphne Malan called them in.

She was, as Hans Malan had told them in England, an admirable housekeeper. She was always there—indeed, every detail of their domestic comfort depended on her—and yet, through the first weeks of their stay, when his eyes, his thoughts, his emotions were concentrated on Catherine, Morton had only vaguely been aware of her. Her very unobtrusiveness contributed to his neglect. She was, as Catherine said smilingly, so terribly shy. Although she was “one of the family,” she never seemed quite to belong to it, to emerge from her chosen, separate existence into theirs. Only, as they

sat at meal-times talking together, when Catherine's morbid vividness took command of them all, Morton had become conscious, once or twice, of grave eyes watching him. In the back of his mind he admitted that those eyes were beautiful, very different in their hazel demureness from Catherine's fiery azure.

It was clear that Hans and Catherine still regarded her as "little Daphne." They treated her, always, as a child, condescending to chaff her, now and then, about her admirer, Piet Strijdom, a boy from a neighbouring farm, who rode over occasionally and glowered at her, speechless, for hours.

Daphne took their chaff, like everything else, with quiet composure. There was something quakerish, withdrawn, about her dress and demeanour. A blonde and secret presence, with hair of the hue of dark heather-honey drawn back demurely; a serious, watchful consciousness brooding beneath brows fine and black as a pencil-stroke. A rather colourless presence, Morton might have called her—and indeed, in the dim light of the oak-shadowed *voorhuis* where they dined, her face showed no colour but the red line of lips closed in a childish gravity. Yes, it was rather as a solemn child that he regarded her, dismissing her domestic efficiency as a talent natural to her sex. Catherine had that as well. But Catherine—or rather the Catherine of happy memory—had so much more. Even in her present invalid state, she enforced her hard, brilliant personality with a definiteness that reduced little Daphne

to the pallor of a still-life pastel beside a strongly-coloured portrait in oils. A solemn child. . . . It was this combination of childishness and solemnity that disconcerted him. A middle-aged man, who was worried as he was, couldn't waste conversation or interest on young girls in the *backfisch* stage. Particularly when they happened to be foreign, incalculable, not English. . . .

To Morton Stone, all those first weeks at Meerlust had a strange, dream-like quality. The contours and smells of the country, the odd style of the house's architecture, the stinkwood furniture and ancient brass with which its rooms were furnished, had an exotic flavour that left him slightly bewildered.

They didn't, naturally, bewilder Catherine at all. She was rapturously recapturing the days when she and Hans had been children together. To Morton there was something beautiful, and at the same time pathetic, in the quickness with which she responded to each remembered detail: the bird-song, the flowers that now bloomed in incredible profusion, the smell of the *veld*, the soft accents of Cape-Dutch dialect. It was pathetic for two reasons. First because these memories, which he could neither share nor understand, increased the distance between them; once again, because all her rapture was shadowed for him by the gloom of an indefinite apprehensiveness.

This very excess of happiness took it out of her. She wasn't, as he could see, and as the Malans' Dutch doctor

told him, any better for the change. It seemed to spur her to a morbid restlessness. She was catching at every memory, within, or just out of reach, as though some inward consciousness told her that the time for its enjoyment was limited. It irked her to find him, as it seemed to her, dull and unresponsive. As for Morton, the sense of impending disaster never left him. He could have faced it more easily, he felt, at home, amid familiar surroundings, than in this strange, unreal oasis of beauty, five thousand miles from anywhere.

Well, in these dubious circumstances, thank God for Hans Malan! From the moment when he had gripped Malan's firm hand on the quay at Capetown he had clung to Catherine's cousin as his only sheet anchor in this foreign haven. Here, at least, he felt, was a man on whom one could rely; and a further scrutiny of Malan in his proper setting had confirmed the impression. This big-boned South African, slow-spoken—yet by no means slow-witted—was a man, he decided, of his own stamp. Malan's tenderness toward Catherine, the way in which his immovable good nature tempered enthusiasms which burned with a flame too perilously bright, were, of themselves, an enormous relief to Morton. Often, when her growing impatience with his own scared attempts at keeping her quiet had swept her finally out of his anxious control, a word from Malan would restore her to sudden composure. Wilful and obstinate as her illness had made her with Morton, with her cousin she grew as meek and biddable as a

sick child. And all the time little Daphne watched them gravely.

"What gets on my nerves," he confided to Malan, "isn't the fact that Catherine won't take care of herself and gets over-excited. It's just the uncertainty of everything."

"The uncertainty?" Malan repeated calmly. "But what is uncertain?"

"I mean that I'm not at all certain that this place—I speak frankly, because I know you'll understand me—that this place is good for her. All this emotion exhausts her. I sometimes feel as if she were losing ground."

"Losing ground? You're too nervous, Morton. If you go on brooding like this, it's you who will break down. The Stellenbosch doctor is perfectly competent. He sees her constantly. If he noticed anything alarming he'd be sure to tell us."

"But *would* he?"

Malan's eyes twinkled shrewdly. "I know just how you feel. All human beings are the same. A man of one race is always inclined to distrust the doctors of another. The fact that our man's a South African . . ."

"No, no. It's not that. I can use my own eyes. I can see that she's losing ground. If you knew her as well as I do!"

"I've known her longer," Malan reminded him.

"That's true, and I'm thankful for it," Morton admitted. "It's an enormous comfort to feel you understand her. But little things worry me—straws that show

how the wind is blowing. . . . The fact that, last week, the doctor forbade her to ride any more. It's sinister, Hans."

"A mere precaution. He saw she was overdoing it. Her pluck drives her hard. For myself, I can't help admiring it. But look here," he went on, "you'll be making a mess of yourself if you worry like this. You're a man who's been used to leading an active life. Ever since she's stopped riding you've been hanging about the place like a mute at a funeral. If you imagine that's good for Catherine, I can assure you you're very much mistaken. What you need is fresh air and exercise, not this invalid existence. You ought to be out shooting or fishing, or riding up on the *berg*."

"But it's not fair to leave Catherine. She'd be lonely," he said.

"Not fair be damned!" Malan answered. "You're too much together. You play on each other's nerves. And as for loneliness," he went on, with a cheery laugh, "why, she needn't be lonely at all. I'm always here. I have to be, worse luck, pottering about the farm and the orchards. You leave her to me, my dear Morton. I'll answer for it that she'll be happy. Why in heaven's name don't you go out riding with Daphne?"

"Poor Daphne!" he said. "I'm afraid she'd be bored to death. And then, Catherine's funny, in these days. She might resent it. She might even be jealous." He smiled, a little uneasily. "Though, thank heaven, I've never yet given her cause to be jealous."

"Admirable husband!" Hans laughed. "The only person who may be jealous is poor Piet Strijdom. It may bring him up to the scratch. You can try it, anyway."

Morton tried it, with tact; and Catherine amazingly leapt at the idea. She had taken the doctor's decree against riding with resignation. "This is my world," she said, with her eyes straying tenderly over the Meerlust gables. "You can't share it, Morton. So why not get a little of your own? You needn't consider me; I shall be quite happy. Hans will look after me. He's always at hand. And he doesn't hang over me with a long face, like you, Morton dear. Don't go breaking the poor child's heart, though," she added mischievously.

"My dear Catherine!"

"Dear boy, I was only joking."

So, in that miracle which is the Cape Province spring, Morton's rides with Daphne began. She had taken the proposal for these expeditions as placidly as she took everything else—not exactly with shyness, but just as a matter of course. Yet when Morton saw her mounted astride of Malan's big bay, he couldn't help feeling what a difference her emancipation from the shades of Meerlust made in her. And he couldn't, by the same token, resist making another of those comparisons that had troubled him lately. When Catherine put on breeches she immediately became a boy—a jolly, sanguine boy, but a boy, all the same. But Daphne was always pre-

eminently a woman, and never more so than when her slouched hat shadowed her blonde hair and the close-fitting riding-coat defined her slim figure.

As they rode through the shades of the oak woods, in absolute silence, Morton became increasingly aware of the fact. There was something intense and provocative in her very demureness. Yet when, a little later, they passed out of those green shadows on to the open *veld*, the clear, bright air revealed to him an entirely different person. In one miraculous moment all the repressions of her suspended life in the half-light of Meerlust were blown away from her. He saw, not the subdued and quakerish figure whose presence had haunted that background, so charged with the admonitions of its ancientness, so shadowed by his own fears of the doubtful future, but a creature of light and air, instinct with the glowing hope and buoyancy of that youth which the events of the last year had persuaded him, regretfully, to abandon.

That air of youth and of hope were enough in themselves to lighten his sombre mind. Yet, as they cantered easily over the old grass-track that soared out of Meerlust's heavy greenness toward the line of the *berg*, whose rugged bastions seemed to exult in the fierceness of the hot sky, he realized that Daphne was not only young, but beautiful. The sweet, aromatic breath of the scrub pervaded her body; the rapid movement gave it an air of freedom, of gay flexibility. As the brim of her hat blew back he could see the sunlight dance in her

hazel eyes as sunlight dances in golden-pebbled brooks; her pale cheeks—how fine their texture was he hadn't guessed—became faintly flushed; her red lips smiled. Through all her delicacy ran a quick flood of health, which shone, diffused, through her body like wine through a translucent vessel. And youth. . . . Ah, youth! Far better not think about that!

They paused on the crown of the foothills. Their horses knee-haltered, they sat in the shade of a grey stone *kopje*, gazing down upon the velvet of the Meerlust oak woods, the blue sea beyond. They spoke very little together on that first morning—not because of the awkwardness that Morton had feared, but because the vague troubling of the heart which he had experienced made it hard to speak. It was enough for him to gaze on something that was delicious and quite unattainable, a creature whose spirit was so utterly divided from his own. This glimpse of her exquisiteness only seemed to increase the difference between them. That gulf must be faced, acknowledged, even emphasized. To assure himself he purposely adopted toward her a mature, paternal attitude, insisting, rather too consciously, on his own middle-agedness.

She surveyed him critically and with a devastating frankness.

"Do you know, Mr. Stone," she said, "I never think of you as being middle-aged?"

He clutched at this generous straw with a pathetic eagerness.

"Ah, Daphne, if you only knew what it feels like. When I see young people like yourself, boys like Piet Strijdom . . ."

She blushed swiftly, adorably.

"Why do you want to spoil everything," she said quickly, "by mentioning *him*? You're as bad as Hans and Catherine. I'm simply tired of it." Her tone was petulant.

"But surely Piet wants to marry you?"

"He may go on wanting. Piet Strijdom's a boy. In myself I'm as much older than him as you are than me." She laughed at her awkward phrasing. "Besides, I don't want to marry anybody," she went on decidedly. "Not for a long time yet, at any rate. I'm perfectly happy as I am."

Yet Morton knew, by her very insistence, that she wasn't perfectly happy; and, indeed, his tactless mention of Piet Strijdom's name had cast a shadow on her enchanting eyes. From that moment they never recaptured the glamour that he had experienced in their upward ride; and when, once more, the green of Meerlust received them she had relapsed, it seemed, into her subdued and secret self.

"Well, how did you get on with Daphne?" Catherine enquired, with a wounding hint of amusement.

"We didn't get on very far," he admitted sorely.

"Courage, Morton, courage!" she mocked him. "If at first you don't succeed . . ."

But all that evening and through the day that fol-

lowed, Morton was striving, in the shadow of Meerlust, to recall the warm, disturbing emotion he had felt during their ride, to catch, if it were only in one glimpse, a vision of that which had enchanted him. In vain! For Daphne it seemed as if the moment of freedom, of expansion, had passed. At Meerlust she was the same as she had always been. Watching her, with a wondering anxiety which didn't, his shamed self-consciousness told him, escape Catherine's eyes, his heart looked forward eagerly to a renewal of that experience. Yet, when it seemed natural that he should ask her to ride with him again, he became confounded with a shyness greater than her own.

The suggestion, in fact, came at last from Catherine herself. Once more, with a strange mingling of ardour and diffidence on his part, they rode up the long slope together, once more he was fired by contact with her glowing youth. He had learned his lesson. He knew better now than to mention Piet Strijdom, and reaped his reward in a series of sweet, ecstatic moments. They did not advance to intimacy—the one thing that Morton most desired and feared—yet there seemed to be growing between them, on these long rambles, a settled, natural, friendly relationship, in which Daphne, the child, assumed a kind of wise, tutelary interest in himself, the man. She took it for granted that she understood him, that she was sorry for him—though that part of her feeling was never even hinted at; and Morton accepted the convention gratefully. She might

imagine any fiction she pleased as long as he might look at her. As they sat on the edge of the *berg* there were long silences between them. Once, in the midst of one of these, she broke in suddenly:

"I know what you're thinking of now. You're dreaming of England."

He had been dreaming of nothing. To tell the truth, he was only thinking how quickly that precious moment must pass. But he let her suppose that she had divined his thoughts.

"That must seem strange to you, Daphne," he said. He loved speaking her name.

"No, it's not strange at all," she said gravely. "My mother was English. There's nothing about me at all that's really South African. You see, I was brought up in England and went to school there until my grandparents died. It was only then, three years ago, that I came out to keep house for Hans."

"But you speak Afrikaans quite easily?"

"Yes, mother taught me. She'd lived here for years, and my first nurse was a Cape woman. But actually I'm English—oh, you can't imagine how English. And when you are homesick like that, I can share every pang of it. You see, that's the great difference between us and Catherine and Hans. Catherine's more South African, almost, than anyone I know."

It was true. Was it this, he wondered, that explained the close bond between him and this child? Was it this that accounted for the widening spiritual breach between

himself and Catherine—that shameful breach which not even the memory of their love nor the sense of duty could span? He wondered; he doubted; yet every day enforced the rightness of Daphne's explanation. On Hans Malan and Catherine the shades of Meerlust imposed a proprietary bond; while he and Daphne were strangers and aliens. Those two were in one camp, himself and Daphne in another. By a curious perversion of the imagination Daphne became for him an incarnation of all his passionate nostalgia. Of course he didn't make Catherine a confidante of this discovery. It salved his conscience to feel that, at least, she was happy; to know that in Meerlust she had found a cure for her restlessness. He was still, almost passionately, playing his appointed rôle of devotion. Apart from his dreams, in every detail of ordinary life, he was hers entirely. He was able to flatter himself on the safety of his own position.

How precarious that safety was, he didn't realize. It was shattered, at last, by means of a trifling accident. Christmas had passed. By this time the sudden splendours of spring had waned. Now Meerlust lay like an island of heavier green in a tawny sea of *veld* that swept upward wave beyond wave to the arching sky. The rivers ran down to the sea in a gin-clear trickle. The scattered rocks of the wilderness radiated fierce heat. When Daphne and Morton rode up to their favourite *kopje* their pace grew languid; the air that moved over the flowerless waste was the breath of a furnace. Now,

more than ever, his thoughts would turn to England.

One morning, when they sat on the height together, their talk flagged for very tiredness. The silence oppressed them. They grew drowsy. Suddenly turning, in the midst of his reflections, Morton saw that she was asleep. She looked so helplessly childish, so lovely, lying there beside him, that Morton could not resist the desire to sate his eyes with the beauty that her closed eyes allowed him to enjoy. While he sat gazing at her thus, bewildered by a tumult of joy and self-pity, he became aware of a moving shadow that crossed her body. He looked, and went white with horror. It was no shadow, but the writhing body of a cobra, the brown snake that the Boers call *bruin-capell*, the deadliest reptile inhabiting the Cape. No doubt that blazing heat had aroused it from its hibernation in the rocks.

For the present the creature seemed unaware of the nature of the obstacle over which it was swarming. It gathered its smooth coils slowly and proceeded to settle down on Daphne's warm body. If once she became conscious of that weight, if once she moved, Morton knew that the snake would strike. She was not aware of it. She lay there, with her pure, pale face composed, a smile on her sleeping lips. His mind worked quickly. Gathering the strength in his tense muscles, he lunged out with all his force; sent Daphne's slight body hurtling down the slope, and with the same movement, leapt aside himself.

It was the most terribly anxious movement of his life. But it succeeded.

As Daphne, wakened by this abrupt violence, went rolling down the hillside, and Morton sprang to his feet, the cobra vanished like a streak. He hurried toward her; picked her up in his arms; explained, in a flood of incoherent words, the reason for his brutality.

"You must have thought I was mad. My poor, sweet darling!"

"Oh, Morton!" she cried. And her pallid face twitched into tears.

Yet, as he clasped her eagerly, trying to soothe her, and she, all yielding and child-like, submitted to his arms, sobbing against him, he became aware of the impossible situation into which the emergency had thrown him. He knew what he had known for long enough yet refused to admit, how utterly he was in love. Her very submissiveness, the way in which she took his embrace for granted, sent him cold with horror. It wouldn't do, he told himself; it simply wouldn't do.

Subduing his passion with an effort that tore his heart, he slowly released her. It was done. Thank God, he hadn't spoken the words that crowded to his tongue. Surprised, yet, as always, submissive, Daphne also recovered herself. Still trembling violently, Morton choked down the fire that consumed him. In an uncertain voice he began to joke about the averted catastrophe; coolly, almost roughly, as though that dreadful embrace had never occurred. Daphne looked

at him, listened to him, wonderingly. He went on talking at random, laughing excitedly; and still she gazed at him, amazed, yet perfectly aware that he was trying to persuade her and himself that nothing had happened. But something had happened, as both of them knew quite well—something that would haunt and torture Morton for ever.

He loved her. Horror and remorse were blended in this discovery. Morton was a proud man and sure of himself. That moment had shattered the foundations of his pride. Ashamed and shaken, he began to collect the fragments of his self-esteem. He told himself solemnly that he was not in love with Daphne. Hour after hour he repeated the affirmation, yet his very persistence gave him the lie. He loved her. He could not escape from it; would never escape from it. Wherever he went, whatever refuge he sought—and he sought them in a new, an almost abject devotion to Catherine, who received it with amused tolerance—the memory of Daphne's soft, young body pursued him. It was for the comfort of his own soul that he now avoided her. Catherine, who noticed everything, remarked it.

"Your rides," she mocked him, "seem to have come to an end rather suddenly?"

"Yes. The *veld* is burned to a tinder. It's cruel for the horses' hoofs, and the heat's terrific."

"Poor little Daphne!" she said. "She was quite waking up!"

And Daphne, who had heard Catherine's words, gazed at him solemnly, contemplatively, without any question in her wide, hazel eyes. Why, indeed, should she question him? She knew all the answers. She knew that he loved her; knew, if she were human, the fire that had swept up in his brain. She knew, and it seemed as though she acquiesced, taking a part of her own in the programme of his expiatory devotion. Not one word did she say, not one look did she give him which showed that she shared their secret. Yet, though every word and every look revealed it, never had she seemed so little, so withdrawn, so undisturbed, composed, expectant.

Expectant of what? Did she know, as Morton knew, that the thing was not ended? Ridiculous! What right had he to imagine that she cared for him? As evidence of that he had nothing but one moment of rapt submissiveness. He had never even kissed her. His lips had never known the softness of that smooth, pale cheek. Why hadn't he kissed her? he often asked himself. Thank heaven he hadn't! For then, indeed, he would have been lost beyond recovery.

There was only one possible path of escape, he told himself—to shake the red dust of Africa from his feet for ever. And that, he hoped, he'd be able to do before long. The heat of advancing summer was beginning to tell on Catherine. The doctor from Stellenbosch admitted that she was losing ground. But Catherine herself clung obstinately to Meerlust. "I'm so happy

here, Morton," she told him. "Why can't you all leave me alone?"

"It's my duty," he told her, "to do what is best for you."

"Your duty?" She smiled wanly. "Yes, Morton, you're awfully dutiful."

It wasn't just duty. It was his only chance of escape from Daphne's calm eyes. He drove into Capetown and booked their berths on a mail-boat. It was only when he had paid for the ticket that he felt really safe. For the first time in months he could face Daphne's eyes without flinching. He began to feel, in fact, a little heroic.

The night before their sailing this sense of triumphant confidence increased. He had come through, he told himself, by the skin of his teeth. It made him exalted, a trifle "fey." Everything was in order for their going but the last of Catherine's packing, in which Daphne had shown herself, as usual, amazingly capable. At dinner that night he fortified himself with a bottle of *Schoengesicht* wine. They made, at the table, a gay little party, talking of the pleasure they would have in entertaining Hans in England.

"You must promise to come over next year," Catherine pleaded, "and bring Daphne with you."

The prospect of seeing Daphne in England sent shivers of hope and of dread down Morton's spine. Indeed, all these farewell platitudes, these forced

gaities were rather harrowing. After dinner he excused himself and hurried over to their cottage to finish his packing.

The night was still, of a milk-warm loveliness. Moonlight sprayed silver on the shining camphor-leaves; late orange-blossom swathed the cottage in a perfume so dense that it could almost be felt. The spirit of Meerlust had never been more subtly intoxicating. The place was so beautiful, that night, that he felt almost sentimentally attached to it. "I shall never see it again," he thought—meaning "I shall never see Daphne." He thrust this emotional weakness behind him and went on with his packing.

He was so lost in it, indeed, that when Daphne entered the room he was not aware of her. He turned to see her, standing in the doorway. At that moment the woman whom he saw was not the Daphne he had known of late. Some trick of the light, or perhaps her own covert emotion, gave her eyes, her face, an aspect that he remembered and treasured.

"Catherine wants me to tell you," she began, then stopped. . . . She must have read in his eyes the emotion that overwhelmed him. She shook her head pitifully; words failed her; she held out her arms to him. He took her; they stood clasped together in the warm half-light, lost to everything but the sudden rapture of love confessed and returned. He kissed her lips, her eyes, her throat, transported by a divine madness, while she, answering his passionate questions, told

him how she had loved him always.

A curious sound, like the snort of an animal, made Morton suddenly raise his eyes with an instinct of defence. In the frame of the doorway, which Daphne had lately occupied, another figure was standing—the wraith of Catherine, her hands clasped, her eyes huge and black with surprise. The sound he had heard was the sudden catch of her breath.

He stood staring at her, but, before he could move, she swayed slightly sideways, then clutched at the door itself, which swung to, concealing her from them. Morton heard, on the floor outside, the sound of something heavy and invisible falling. A dull, subdued impact. Then silence.

III

It was past midnight when the doctor from Stellenbosch drove splashing through the drift. Warned by the beam of his car's headlights, which dredged up, as it were, the white ghost of the house from depths of a dense, hot darkness, Hans Malan stalked out on to the *stoep* to meet him. Together the pair of gigantic shadows went striding down the camphor-tree avenue toward the Stone's cottage. Morton was there alone with his wife. It was he who had picked up Catherine's limp figure and laid it on the bed, while Daphne ran to the house to tell her brother what had happened.

They found him sitting beside her, his big hands clenched, his eyes, puzzled and incredulous, fixed on the prostrate form. Hans Malan stood in the doorway. His enormous bulk, filling it, looked bowed and heavily helpless, like some huge, stricken tree.

Morton did not see him. He sat there so dazed that the doctor, moving about his swift business, had almost to push him aside. It was easy for those skilled eyes to grasp the nature of the disaster. One quick glance confirmed Hans Malan's conjectures.

"It's a stroke," he said, "a left-sided hæmorrhage in the brain. Not altogether unexpected, I'm sorry to say. In kidney disease the walls of the arteries are weakened, so that any emotional disturbance, any sudden shock . . ."

"Any shock?" Hans Malan repeated rapidly. There was a keen emphasis in his question that pierced Morton's brain with an arrow of guilty fear. "What kind of shock, doctor?" he persisted, speaking in Dutch.

The doctor shook his head vaguely. "Perhaps no definite shock. The mere fact of all these exciting preparations for the voyage. She didn't want to go, did she?"

"She resented it; hated it. It was her husband's idea." His words had the weight of a denunciation.

"Well, well; there's no more to be said—no more to be done. Perhaps she'll recover consciousness; perhaps she won't. On the whole, if she doesn't, we ought to regard it as a blessing."

"My God!" The words came like a sigh from Malan's set lips. Then a strange thing happened. That mountainous bulk in the doorway seemed suddenly to sway. Hans Malan tottered forward, then fell to his knees, as a great tree falls, beside Catherine's bed; his big hands groped for her unconscious hand. He knelt there beside her, his body shaken by monstrous sobs.

The doctor from Stellenbosch turned away tactfully and picked up his bag; but the eyes of Morton Stone showed no emotion. He stared at Malan and his wife with the same dazed fixedness, till, suddenly, as though his voice came from a distance, he also spoke.

"I suppose," he was saying, "I had better cancel our passage. In her present condition it would be difficult to take her home."

"To take her home?" The words seemed to sting Malan out of his transport of grief. He rose, white with fury; his voice was shaken with hatred and passion. "You shall not take Catherine away from Meerlust," he said. "This is her home, she belongs to it; if you had not tried to tear her away she wouldn't be lying here like this!"

"For the present," the doctor adroitly continued, "she's not fit to be moved. Later on, perhaps . . ."

"Never . . . Never!" Malan passionately affirmed. "*He* may go, if he likes; but she stays. She belongs to Meerlust."

"Of course I shall stay, if she stays," Morton answered dully.

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And he stayed. For three years he stayed in the shadow of Meerlust; a model of the uttermost devotion; a lost soul in purgatory. It would have been better, as the doctor had said, if Catherine Stone had died. Within twenty-four hours of the original disaster she recovered consciousness, lying, as the half-dead lie, with one side paralysed and without the power of speech. She could not speak, but she could see. Her eyes never stopped seeing. Through the long hours of day and night when Morton sat by her, watching in silence, those blue eyes dwelt on him. There was no bitterness, no accusation in them—only a supernatural power of penetration, terribly impersonal, which seemed to pierce through into the depths of his consciousness, stripping bare the pretences of tenderness, the realities of remorse with which he comforted himself. He might easily deceive himself, but never Catherine's eyes. "If ever a human being made expiation," he told himself, "I am doing so now. . . ."

At times the loneliness of his vigil became almost unbearable; but even the company of the stricken woman, with its consoling suggestion of a duty performed, was more tolerable than that of the living people in Meerlust. From the moment when she had hurried from the scene of the catastrophe to call for Malan's help,

Morton had conceived a terror of meeting Daphne's eyes. The sense of secret horror and guilt which their meeting glances conjured up between them was more devastating even than Catherine's penetrating stare. It seemed as if Daphne herself were aware of this; for she acquiesced in it, avoiding all contact with Morton that was not necessary; taking care that they never should be left alone together; withdrawing herself, with a skill that amounted to genius, into the shadowed background which she had possessed at the time of their arrival at Meerlust. Her presence in the house, in their life, was as ghostly, as intangible as that of a spectre; and Morton was grateful to escape from a more positive haunting. For all that she meant to him now they might have been living in different worlds.

Through this period, indeed, his only contacts with wholly living souls were with the doctor and Hans Malan. Apart from his solitary outburst of passion on the night of the disaster Catherine's cousin had shown no further signs of emotion. At that moment Morton had vaguely suspected—and cared as vaguely—that the Dutchman had divined the secret of his passion and Daphne's; but when once it had been agreed that Catherine should live out the rest of her days at Meerlust, Hans Malan had relapsed into his stolid, unemotional self. The mere presence of his sombre strength was a comfort to Morton; he was grateful, once more, to feel, that in any emergency Malan would be there; to realize that the man was sufficiently obtuse not to

notice the change in his relations with Daphne.

And, quite apart from all this, Malan was helpful. This mountain of a man, with his slow-moving, clumsy hands, became as deft as a well-trained woman in the nursing of Catherine. It was almost pathetic to see the way in which his devotion to his cousin softened him; his wisdom, his thoughtful gentleness. In every moment when the routine of the farm-work did not engross him, he was entirely at Morton's service and hers. When Morton was exhausted with watching, he would take his place and sit for long hours in silence at Catherine's bedside. And Catherine's eyes, Morton noticed, those piercing eyes, would soften and grow mild and happier when Hans appeared.

"You were right, when you said she should stay here, Hans," he confessed. "If only for myself, I'm thankful that we decided to keep her at Meerlust. I don't think I could ever have lived through this without your help."

Malan smiled slowly. "I told you that she belonged here. You forget we were children together. I'm very fond of her."

And Catherine would glance from one to the other with a silent scrutiny behind which Morton could never imagine what she was thinking.

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In the following spring, a third figure was added to those that sat of an evening in the gloom of Meerlust:

Piet Strijdom, the young man from a neighbouring farm about whose attentions Catherine had always chaffed Daphne. He rode over every day at sundown, and established himself, like a carved wooden image, in the *voorhuis*, joining ponderously in their evening meal, but rarely speaking. In the early stages of Catherine's illness he had tactfully absented himself, but now that the imminence of death was removed, he returned to prosecute his suit.

When first Strijdom renewed his visits his presence brought an acute, inexplicable pang to Morton's heart. He began to watch, with tortured eagerness, for any signs of enthusiasm on Daphne's part; he even dared to seek her forbidden eyes in search of it. The realization of his jealousy, of the fact that in spite of his forced renunciations he still loved and desired her passionately, put Morton to shame. But the buried passion was stronger than shame in him. Repress it as he would, his heart was torn by the thought of Daphne's delicacy, her lovely youth enveloped in this lout's embraces. He could never convince himself that she had ceased to love him. When the meal was over, and she followed Piet Strijdom like a willing victim on to the dark *stoep*, he could scarcely restrain himself from pursuing them and claiming her as his own. For she *was* his own; he had seen in her eyes what no other would ever see!

Daphne never herself alluded to the progress of this dreary courtship. Apart from the small change of their domestic life, she never spoke to him. All that he ever

heard of it came to him, with a suggestion of coarseness, from Hans Malan's lips. It was Hans, indeed, who casually announced to him the date in the autumn which had been fixed for Daphne's wedding.

"We shall miss little Daphne," he said. "Daphne's a good girl. We shall need another woman in the house; so I've written to a cousin of mine who lives in Pretoria."

In September Daphne was married. Morton did not see her go. The wedding festivities were held at the Strijdoms' farm, out of respect for Catherine's illness. Hans Malan drove over with the bride to Stellenbosch, leaving Morton to look after Catherine while he was away. All that evening Morton sat in anguish at Catherine's bedside, unable to banish from his mind the vision of Daphne's white loveliness ravished by those gross hands. Could any scruples of conscience justify such a brutal sacrifice? He could not answer; the child was so strange, so secret!

And Catherine, that evening, watched him with an unusually piercing intentness. She knew—and it seemed to him as if her stricken brain were gloating triumphantly over its knowledge. When he could bear it no longer, he tore himself away from her scrutiny. The air was heavy again with the scent of orange-blossom as he paced the paths down which he and Daphne had passed in silence, hand in hand. The memory of her slim, smooth fingers tortured him.

He should have been thankful, Morton told himself, to escape the reminders implicit in Daphne's presence, to feel that he had completed another stage in his journey of expiation, to see, instead of that harrowing, delicate figure, the gross form of Hans's cousin from Pretoria; yet, when she was gone from his life the light that had remained passed out of it.

He settled down into a sombre, bucolic existence, in which there was no solace whatever but the barren consolation of his continued devotion to Catherine. Day after day, month after month, he kept watch by his wife's side, taking turns with the equally devoted Malan, whose care never varied, and the woman from Pretoria, to whose ceaseless banal chatter he closed his ears. He lost all sense of time and of his own surroundings. There seemed no reason why this life should not continue for ever.

One evening, when he returned from his listless wandering over the *veld*, the housekeeper ran out to meet him. Her voice was broken by tears.

"She is gone!" she cried. "Poor soul, another attack. . . . An hour ago. . . . She is gone!"

The news was too startling to be true. Almost blind with emotion, Morton staggered, breathless and drunkenly, down the camphor-tree avenue. Now that the end had come there was no more remorse in his mind. Nothing remained in its chaos but remembrances of old tenderness and passion—the vision of the brilliant, vivid creature whom he had courted and won;

visions of her innocent youth and its passionate surrender; the vision, incredibly sweet and tender, of their first days of married life in England, of a warm, familiar room penetrated by the odour of burning fir-logs. All the sweetness of those past days, so shattered by passion and obliterated by mortality, rose up, like a vapour, and choked him. His limbs groped darkly; his body was shaken.

Through a mist of tears he saw the ill-lit bedroom. On the bed itself lay Catherine's quiet body, relaxed in utter peacefulness. And her eyes were closed. Thank God . . . those eyes were closed! Beside it, kneeling, his huge arms outstretched to clasp the lifeless figure, sprawled Hans Malan. He leaned there as motionless as though he, too, were dead, sunk in a stupor from which the sound of Morton's entrance could not rouse him. His silence, his immobility, were so awful that Morton felt forced to break it. He called his name; but still Malan did not stir. Was he dead, after all? Morton took him by the shoulder:

"Hans! For God's sake . . ."

Then Hans Malan raised his head from the bed and looked up at him. Never had Morton seen such suffering in a human face. There was in it an acuteness which made his own emotion seem feigned and trifling.

"Go away!" he cried, in Dutch. "Go away! You shall not touch her. She is mine. . . . She was always mine! My love, my little darling, my little Katjie!"

Once more Morton laid his hand on his shoulder,

trying to soothe him. But this time Malan tore himself roughly away from him. He staggered to his feet; his enormous bulk towered above Morton. And now there was in his eyes not suffering, but hatred. He stared for one moment, then opened his mouth in a burst of terrible scornful laughter:

“Do you think she was ever yours, from the moment she came here? Can’t you understand your own language? She was mine . . . she was *mine!* We loved. . . . We were lovers. Go away, you fool, go away, and leave us alone!”

Like a dead man, a ghost, he went out. Like a ghost of stone the white walls of Meerlust surveyed him. Out of the warm night welled wave upon wave of perfume, ebbing, like a slow tide, from waxen orange blossom.

Egeria

THIS is the case of Julian Willoughby, the pianist: the great pianist is what the newspapers call him. Though music-schools can turn out competent human pianolas by the dozen, genius is as rare in music as in any of the other arts. No word in the journalistic vocabulary is more misused; but Julian Willoughby had, beyond doubt, a thin streak of that precious metal in his composition, though you wouldn't have guessed it to look at him. Of course the poor fellow was delicate. You could see that in his great black eyes; in his gait, that alternated between a slouch and a swagger; in his constricted chest; in his face, dead white, with whiskers that came down to his cheekbones, Spanish fashion, and in the black hair that straggled down over his eyes when he played. Lanky, clammy, invertebrate: that was the impression he gave you. When you shook hands with him his fingers felt limp and cold, as though he were only half alive. He habitually wore a black velvet coat, a floppy tie, and a bangle on his wrist. I'm not sure he didn't wear corsets.

And yet, when he played, you forgot all these things; for, in addition to the mechanical virtuosity that is so common in these days, he possessed a quality that

was all his own. He wasn't, like some of the greatest pianists, a master of his music, expounding, revealing, clarifying the texture of what he played. On the contrary, his music was master of *him*. Through that feeble physique it expressed itself in terms of its original emotion; when he played you were conscious only of the soul of the music coming through, ghostly, intangible, other-worldly, like the words of a disembodied spirit in the mouth of a medium.

That, I think, was the explanation of his compelling, if morbid, power. He was more a medium than a pianist; and through him the tormented souls of great composers spoke to one. You felt that, above all, in his Chopin. What reached you was not the master's sentimentality nor even his easy brilliance, but some emanation from his harrowed, hectic spirit that carried you away from his music into his life—to Majorca, and that fatal winter that he spent in the arms of Georges Sand. This was Willoughby's peculiar gift. Its power came, as I say, not from him, but through him. Nothing of it was his own.

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Not even his name was his own. That in which he was baptized and which Kate, characteristically, changed for him, was George Chicken. Kate, when she married him, saw that this wouldn't do; and he accepted the change as he accepted everything else that she proposed to him. I doubt if he ever originated anything himself

but the whiskers, the velvet jacket, and certainly the gold bangle.

The figure of Kate Willoughby was as well known to musical people as that of her husband. Every evening, when her husband played, she could be seen sitting stolidly in a chair at the side of the platform watching him through the corner of one eye. When his programme was finished and he sidled off the stage she followed him like a dog. She never looked at the audience. Her eyes were all for her husband. People were usually sorry for him. "What a pity," they said, "that a young genius should be married to a woman old enough to be his mother! How insensitive she looks! What he needs is a woman of temperament!"

It is true that Kate was ten years older than Willoughby and that she looked insensitive; but the people who turned up their noses at her did not realize that, without her, Willoughby literally would not exist.

The circumstances of their marriage are obscure. It is said she was the daughter of a small tradesman in a Midland town. When she was thirty her father died and left her nothing but a slowly-dwindling business. Physically she was stunted, so dark as to make one suspect a Jewish descent, wholly unattractive to men, marked out, from the day of her birth, for perpetual spinsterhood. She did not even make friends among women. Lonely and determined she ran her haberdashery store, assisted only by a pale young man whom she terrorized.

Two years after her father's death, George Chicken (or, as we must now call him, Julian Willoughby) appeared. It was part of Kate Millar's weekly routine to visit the cinema on Friday nights. There she saw Willoughby, and was attracted by him. Whether she loved him is another matter, unless you can give the name of love to a fierce possessive instinct, half-maternal. She saw that he looked half-starved; and, through the trash that he played she guessed the existence of a rare musical talent. She played the piano herself—but not like that.

So, night after night, she went to the Majestic Picturedrome; and, knowing how thrifty she was, people began to talk, and to wonder what she was after. She didn't hear their gossip; for, all through the week, she scarcely spoke to a soul but an occasional customer and the pale young man who was almost too scared to address her. Night after night she went there, sitting in the front row where the pictures were nothing to her but a dazzling blurr, her interests centred in the pianist. Winter came, and she noticed, with anxiety, that Willoughby had begun to cough. At the end of the evening the sweat stood out on his forehead. He mopped it with a coloured silk handkerchief. Magenta. Then came a night when a stranger filled his place at the piano. Panic seized her. She went boldly to the box-office and demanded Willoughby's address. They smiled, and gave it to her.

She found Willoughby doctoring himself in some

atrocious lodgings, too ill to realize the meaning of her visit. First of all, to the landlady's relief, she sent for a doctor. Next, to the landlady's scandal, she installed herself as nurse. It was pleurisy, the doctor said. Mr. Chicken was in a bad way, and he wouldn't commit himself as to the future. What the patient needed, first of all, was a long rest.

Kate saw that he had it. As soon as he was fit to be moved she took Willoughby to her own house, setting aside for his use an airy bed-sitting-room above the shop, in which, at some personal sacrifice, she placed her beloved piano. There he became convalescent and, in the end, recovered.

All this time, as one must believe, their relations were as proper as could be. The slanders of the landlady, who had lost a regular tenant, had no effect on Kate. She had chosen her man—if man you can call him—and whatever people might say, she meant to stick to him. One admires her courage as much as one marvels at her taste. Malicious tongues said it was her only chance.

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Be this as it may, there is no denying that she, and she alone, transformed George Chicken into Julian Willoughby the pianist. As soon as he could stand the strain of work she set about getting him properly taught. Then she bundled him up to London to interview a famous conductor. This was her first triumph. The greatest things were promised if only his health im-

proved. That didn't worry her. She could look after his health if his teachers would do the rest.

Determined as ever, she sold up her business in the provincial town for less than a thousand pounds and took a flat in London for a year. A strange couple! Until the day when she changed his name they were always Mr. Chicken and Miss Millar to one another. After that he was still Mr. Willoughby. He had his own room and his own Steinway grand, and she never entered it without his permission except when he was ill.

Her small capital speedily dwindled. She watched it going grimly. Though she didn't look like a gambler she had staked her last penny on Willoughby's future and, in the end, she won. A series of London recitals that cost her a hundred and fifty pounds justified her hopes. What was needed now, they told her, was musical experience, contact with new influences, continental travel. So she bought him a stock of woollen underwear, gave up the flat, and took him abroad. By this time he was beginning to earn a little money by his playing. All that side of the business was in the hands of Kate, who interviewed agents, stuck out for terms, handled all the money, and saved it carefully, for already their margin was a small one.

In Berlin, that winter, he fell ill; and again she nursed him. When he recovered, a series of concerts was arranged to set them on their feet; but as Kate went round canvassing for tickets she realized that, among

his own countrymen at any rate, reasonable doubts as to the nature of their relations were checking the sales. That he was a wonderful pianist everyone admitted. But *was* he quite respectable? On her way home she thought the matter over.

"Mr. Willoughby," she said, "I think we ought to be married."

And married they were, by the English chaplain in Berlin. After that his recitals became a great success, so great, that when she counted their funds she saw that they would be able to escape the rigours of the north and spend the next winter in Italy. There, with sunshine and leisure, he would be able to prepare a programme for his triumphal return to London, with a continental reputation behind him, in the following season.

Beyond the fact that he was now "Julian" and she "Kate" their condition had not greatly changed. Now, as before, he was entirely in her hands. She told him when to go to bed and when to get up; she fed him with hot milk; ordered him to change his shirts; shut him up in his room to practise, and cut his hair for him. His inner life, so utterly divided from hers, pursued its mysterious, subconscious way. And she was content: she was Kate Willoughby, the wife of a celebrity, the mother, to all intents and purposes, of a genius. That he should love her she did not ask. Perhaps it was just as well that he did nothing so positive, for if his personality had been as strong as hers, conflicts would have

arisen and his music might have suffered. Even as it was she had to fight unceasingly against his natural indolence. She had to switch him on, as one switches on a gramophone, to practise. He had no initiative. He wasn't really a man. He was just a sensitive medium for the expression of great music.

So they went to Italy, settling in Posillipo, a suburb of Naples, and there the trouble began. Perhaps it was due directly to the romantic atmosphere of that peerless bay with its wall of mountains by day, its girdle of twinkling fires by night. Their villa itself, a converted *contadino's* cabin with a straggling garden and many-pillared pergolas, was a proper setting for the romance that had never come to them. There was something exhilarating in the sunshine, in the bright, dry air that drifted down into their sun-drenched garden from the snows of the Abruzzi, in the voices of girls singing through the olives, in the white lateen sails reaching out gaily over the blue to the enchanted shape of Capri, poised midway in the distance. The orange trees of their garden were in bloom and laden with ripening fruit amid many roses and dark-leaved oleanders. In January the first anemones appeared. They were living in an atmosphere of eternal spring, sweet, crystalline, and sensuous.

Gradually a change came over Willoughby. It showed itself first in a distinct gain of strength that overjoyed her. All his life, in the sodden midlands and in the clearer cold of Central Europe, Wil-

loughby's body had simply struggled for existence; whatever vitality he possessed had been poured out daily to nourish the pale, exotic flower of his music. In this blander climate, like a starved plant that rejoices in a genial soil, the musician became a man.

His attitude towards her changed. When they had been settled for less than a month at *La Fiorita*, as their villa was called, they were sitting out one night in the *belvedere* at the end of their pergola watching the full moon climb above the mountains of Sorrento. The night was not chilly; but fearing that Willoughby might take cold, she came down the garden with an Alpine cloak that she had bought for him in Munich. She found him rapt, gazing at the snaky track of yellow moonlight on the water. Even before he spoke she was aware of something tense and emotional in the air; but when she threw the cloak over his shoulders he did not thank her as usual. He stood gazing down at her with a look in his eyes that she had never seen before except when he was playing. She felt herself blushing beneath his gaze. Then, clasping her in his arms, he kissed her lips. It was the kiss of a lover, the like of which she had never known before, and she, with her curious, spinsterly instinct, shrank from it.

"What are you doing?" he cried. "What's the matter with you? Can't I kiss you?"

"Julian, you're so rough. I don't understand kisses like that."

"Aren't you my wife?" he said. "Is there any reason

why I shouldn't love you?"

For the first time in her life she was aware of the man's potential strength; and it came as a shock to her, for, so far, she had merely been concerned with his physical weakness; and though she was flattered by this display of passion she couldn't quite persuade herself that it was seemly, or be sure that incidents of this kind wouldn't interfere with his music. She could never really think of him as anything but the white-faced invalid whom she had rescued from the cinema. So, conscientiously, and in spite of his irritation, she restrained these ardours. She couldn't see that the man had been suddenly smitten with beauty, that the thawed blood was beginning to move in his veins, that love was a necessity.

She had hoped, indeed, that this new birth of energy would find its expression in his music. Every morning, as had been her custom for more than a year, she would open his piano, put the room ready for him, and tell him that it was time to practise. Then she would sit down in a corner and listen, enthralled by the ecstasy of a creator who sees a work of art growing under her hands. But, after that strange night in the passionate moonlight, Julian began to show a curious disinclination for work in the morning.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" he would say. "Why should I waste the sunshine? Do you realize that I've lived all these years like a potato in a damp cellar? I've never seen the sun before!"

She reasoned with him; told him that Art was his life; that, in any case, they had nothing else to live on.

"Live!" he cried. "But I've never lived! That's just it. It's about time I began."

They quarrelled. She knew that she would have to be firm with him; but the end of their quarrel threw him into her arms. By this time she was getting more used to a lover's kisses even though she did not understand them; and so, by alternate coaxing and yielding, she kept him at his work, knowing that now, more than ever, his future depended on her.

Still he was restless. His changes from passion to moodiness troubled her. When he had put in an afternoon's work he would come to her with despair in his eyes and propose a tram-ride into Naples. There, on the brilliantly-lighted terrace of the Gambrinus Café, they would sit together, he in his great slouch hat and flowing cape, she in a tweed costume that the provincial tailor had made for her, with a tight black veil and pheasant's feathers in her hat. A strange couple they must have seemed to the inquisitive Neapolitan crowd. And in these evenings a new terror seized her. She saw that Willoughby had begun to notice women. He had never done that before. How she hated them, these Neapolitans with their slim ankles, their slender cloaked figures and their starch-pale faces! She was even frightened of the languishing attitudes and luscious shape of their maid Concetta.

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Willoughby gave a concert in Naples, and it was something of a success. She, with her eye on their finances, had printed a notice at the end of the programme: *Signor Willoughby is prepared to take a limited number of advanced pupils*; but nearly a month passed before anything came of it. Willoughby knew nothing about it; for he had not taken the trouble to look at his own programme; and she was secretly disappointed, for she had planned that he might give lessons in the afternoon when his practising was over. She wanted to keep his mind on music and to distract him, perhaps, from the temptations to which his growing indolence exposed him.

So Bianca Trenelli came into their lives: a girl of eighteen, precocious, gifted, beautiful, the daughter of a Neapolitan senator and an English mother.

"It was such a relief to me, Mrs. Willoughby," said the Marchesa Trenelli, "to see you and to know that Mr. Willoughby was happily married. Bianca is young and impetuous, and musicians—I mean Italian musicians—are so unscrupulous."

Kate nodded sympathetically. "I never leave the room when my husband is playing," she said. "He cannot work without me." And, this being understood, Bianca appeared at "Villa Fiorita" a week later for her first lesson.

Willoughby resented the whole arrangement. He was nervous and irritable. Spurred on by Kate, he had been working at his London programme, and, in par-

ticular, on two enormous modern works: Balakirev's *Islamey* and the *Prometheus* of Scriabin. This teaching business was an imposition, and he hated it. His duty was to play good music, not to teach Neapolitan flappers.

Their dispute was at its height when Bianca's arrival was announced. She came with a bunch of flowers from her mother and no sooner had she appeared than Kate knew what she had to fear. Taller than herself, with fair hair, black eyebrows, amber eyes, and a complexion of flushed ivory, Bianca was her physical antithesis and aroused in her a fierce anticipatory jealousy.

All through the lesson Kate kept her station in the corner like a chaperon at a dance. The girl was musical, and, as she played, Kate saw Willoughby warming to the work. All his ill-temper had disappeared, and when, fearing that the excitement might tire him, she told them, from her corner, that the full hour had passed, he seemed disappointed.

"Can't I tell for myself when I'm tired?" he said. "I've enjoyed every minute."

"And I also, signora," said Bianca demurely. "How much I look forward to coming here again!"

"I hope that my husband can stand it," Kate replied rather grimly. "Only this morning he was saying that he did not really like teaching."

"Teaching *me*?" asked Bianca, with her eyes on his.

"When will you come again?" he asked, eagerly.

Bianca blushed as she tried to remember her engagements. Willoughby held her delicate hand in a long

farewell. As for Kate, he did not seem aware of her existence.

So a long term of lessons began, and through every one of these agonizing hours, Kate held her position in the corner according to the Marchesa's instructions. She knew that she was right out of the picture; that Willoughby, gradually yielding to an infatuation, was trying to isolate himself from her and to forget her presence. Sometimes, as Bianca played, she and Willoughby would talk together in voices so low that Kate could not hear them; his hand directed Bianca's fingers; his head bent close to hers. Sometimes, in an interval of silence, they gazed at one another, smiling; and Kate would have liked to break the silence with a cry. Yet, all through this period she was trying to live her own life and regulate his, as though nothing could happen. She still waited on him hand and foot; she still gave him his goat's milk in the middle of the morning, and drove him to practise at the appointed time. This last was the most necessary service of all; for Bianca's lessons seemed to disturb him and make him inclined to dream rather than work. He would sit for half-an-hour at a time staring in front of him over the music on the piano, until Kate recalled him. Then he would grumble at her; but still she forced him to work, for winter was now warming into spring, and his ambitious London programme was still incomplete.

Once she dared to suggest to him that the lessons, or rather *séances*, with Bianca should cease. He refused to

consider it. "It was *you* who proposed them," he said. "Besides, I thought we wanted money?" It was true.

"You think it's worth while?" she asked.

He laughed. He wouldn't even answer her.

It seemed to her now as if the secret whisperings and contacts of these two were approaching an emotional climax. She thanked heaven for the strictness of the Italian social code that made it impossible for Bianca to meet her master at any other time but those of the lessons, when she, Kate, was sitting like an ogress in the background.

And the climax came. It was on a morning of April, and Bianca, coming early to her lesson with a bundle of satiny roses in her arms, entered the room before Kate arrived. Willoughby saw her standing with the roses in the doorway and went to meet her. She held the flowers out to him, and he, impulsively, took her hands and the roses together, driving a thorn into one of her fingers. She gave a cry, starting backward. Through the scent of the flowers Willoughby kissed her. Kate, hurrying in to her duties, found them standing abashed, confused, with the roses on the floor between them. They did not even notice her. (That was what Kate hated in Bianca more than anything—her contemptuous Latin indifference.) As she picked up the roses fallen between them Willoughby stared through her as though she did not exist. His eyes were still fixed on Bianca.

"This morning *you* shall play for me," he said.

"But I can't," said Bianca. "You made me prick my finger."

"Let me see!" He took her hand roughly.

"Don't!" she whispered.

"Then I will play for *you*," he said.

"I shall like it. I am lazy to-day."

He sat down at the piano and began to play the prelude to *Tristan*. Bianca crouched at the keyboard beside him. Kate, having shaken the bunch of roses out of its confusion, moved gently in the background, arranging the flowers in a wide-mouthed Florentine bowl. Suddenly a sound like a pistol-shot made her jump. Willoughby had slammed down the lid of the piano. He stalked over and took her tightly by the arm.

"I can't play a note with you in the room," he said.

"Julian! What do you mean?"

"It's impossible. Go! Go, for God's sake!"

"I shall not go," she said in a voice that was strangely firm. She saw herself, small and swart, standing up to him as he bent over her, pale with passion. "I shall *not* go," she repeated.

"You'll regret this," he cried. "All your life you'll regret it! Do you want to ruin me?" He started back to the piano. Bianca, terrified by the developing scene, had stolen away. "Why, she's gone!" he cried.

"And a good riddance. She's been nothing but a curse to you!"

"I love her," he cried. "My God, how I love her!"

Kate went on arranging Bianca's roses.

"Look here, Kate," he said at last, "if you cross me in this you'll have ruined my life. I can't live without her, and what's more, I won't."

"You can't live without me, either," she replied serenely.

He knew it was true; admitted it. "But that's different," he said. "There are two sides of life, the practical and the æsthetic. Bianca supplies my inspiration for the second; you're useful for the first."

"Thank you very much," said Kate.

"Now you're talking pertly, like a girl in a shop," he cried, eager to insult her. "Can't you see that an ideal love is necessary to an artist? Something exalted. . . . What is my life after all? Music. Take away music and I'm nothing . . . nothing! And at last I've found the inspiration I needed. Katie, be patient with me! I feel now that I shall do great things. I'm changed."

"I know you're changed," she said sadly.

But she only said that to gain time. She was thinking, swiftly, desperately hard, for she knew it was touch and go. The proper thing, no doubt, was to inform the Marchesa that her husband, as a music teacher, was no less dangerous than an Italian. Then the fat would be in the fire; one flare-up and the affair would be over. But she dared not do this for two reasons. In the first place the money that came to them from Bianca Trenelli's lessons was almost essential to the nice financial balance that she had arranged to carry them

onward to the date of the London recitals. In the second place Willoughby's preparation for these concerts was now reaching a critical stage, and an emotional storm such as violent measures might provoke would probably leave him shattered and incapable of working. If she could only bring herself to treat him as a child, to coax him, to humour him . . . He stood before her with tears in his eyes, and seeing him, she decided.

"Very well, Julian," she said, "I shall not interfere with you."

"But she's gone . . . she's gone," was all that Willoughby could say.

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From that moment until the hour of the next lesson Willoughby was intolerable. Kate saw that she could do nothing with him and, wisely, left him alone. The appointed day came, and with it Bianca. She sailed in as if nothing had happened, with another armful of roses from the Marchesal garden. This time she presented them to Kate with the slyest and most insinuating of glances. Willoughby sat down at the piano and looked appealingly at his wife. Kate took up Bianca's roses and left the room.

It was then that she realized the difficulty of her plan, and began to doubt its wisdom; but, once having made up her mind, she was determined to see it through. It is impossible to paint the tortures of jealousy and of humiliation that she endured. She heard

him launch into the prelude that he had begun and abandoned on the day before. He played magnificently, she thought; but she could not bear to listen. Then, once again, he suddenly stopped. The silence that followed wounded her. She ran down the garden towards the sea. She stood there on the *belvedere* for an hour, dazed and blinded with sunshine.

At the end of the lesson Willoughby joined her there. He was restless and talkative.

"This afternoon you must practise," she said.

"No, I can't work to-day," he told her. "My head is too full of big things. I think I could write a concerto off-hand, but, somehow, I want time . . . time to compose my thoughts. Let us go down into the city."

She knew in her heart that he had proposed this in order that he might catch a glimpse of the stucco *palazzo* in which Bianca lived; but she also was eager to find some distraction from her thoughts, and consented. They spent the warm spring evening on a café terrace, scarcely speaking to one another; but when they reached the "Villa Fiorita" late at night Willoughby caught her in his arms, kissing her passionately. This time she shrank from his kisses for a new reason; she guessed that, in the dark, he was trying to imagine that her lips were Bianca Trenelli's. In the days that followed she found him more demonstrative than ever toward her, and guessed, to put it in her own words, that he was "letting off steam." Therefore, though

she hated him for it, she grew more passive than ever.

A month went by. Three times a week in the "Villa Fiorita" Julian and Bianca met. Each day Kate gravely accepted the roses the Marchesa sent her, and then disappeared; but by this time she had begun to realize that she had made a mistake. She had hoped to gain money; and this, indeed, she had done; but she now knew that, in spite of what she had imagined, Willoughby's music had suffered. His passion had filled him with the exaltation of a narcotic drug in which he was content to dream of great achievements, to dream . . . and nothing more.

She said not a word; but when she saw that his art was going to the winds her soul was filled with a sort of bitter satisfaction. She knew that it was now too late to repair her mistake; but it was not too late to reap whatever benefits lay in it. She did not taunt him with the failure of Bianca's æsthetic inspiration; she even continued to suffer his vicarious embraces; but, with a growing sense of her own power, she watched the progress of his artistic degeneration and even deliberately aided it. This was to be her revenge. She only wondered how long she might dare to keep it up; for the London engagement was now only two months ahead and the risk of failure faced her.

She took that risk. With regard to his music she became consciously neutral. She would not even speak of it. Where, in all their former life, she had coaxed and

driven him to work, she now left him to himself. For days together he did not touch the piano. The works that he was studying lay littered on the top of it. One day, greatly daring, she tidied them up and put them away in a cupboard. Next morning he missed them, and asked her what she had done with them. She only told him where they might be found.

He gazed at her reproachfully.

"I can't understand you. It looks as if you took no interest in me."

"Why should I?" she answered. "I'm only concerned with the practical side of your life. You made that clear enough."

"But you don't even help me," he grumbled.

"Ask Bianca," she said.

At this he lost his temper, and, as if to show his independence, set fiercely to work. She heard him, and, for a moment, doubted herself. Perhaps after all, he would beat her.

But she had no need to be frightened. Sickened with his own failure he abandoned work once more and threw himself more violently than ever into the raptures of his intrigue with Bianca, as though, in this manner, he might forget himself. He suffered, and Kate saw that he was suffering, but still held her hand. Once or twice a treacherous pity nearly got the better of her, for Willoughby, under the stresses of passion and frustration, was beginning to lose the physical fitness that Naples had given him. She compelled her-

self to be callous. That was his own look-out, she told herself. Let him learn!

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And so the end came. One morning, at the breakfast-table, she handed him, without a word, a letter from his agent in London. The hall was booked, the orchestra engaged. What he now wanted were the details of Mr. Willoughby's programme. The date of the concert was only six weeks distant, and he felt that the preliminary advertising should begin. Of an artistic triumph he had no doubts; he even hoped for something more. Willoughby stared at the letter. Kate went on mixing the coffee. She knew that her hour had come.

He rose from the table and turned his back on her, gazing out over the sparkling bay. Then she heard a choking sob. He was crying out loud like a child.

"I can't do it, I *can't* do it!" he cried. "There's no more music in me. I'm broken. I'm done for."

Kate said nothing. She herself wanted to cry, but her Midland obstinacy helped her to hold on till the end.

"Six weeks," he groaned. "It's impossible . . . impossible. Why have you forsaken me like this?" He turned on her savagely. "How can you be so cruel?"

"Cruel?" she repeated.

"Kate, help me! For God's sake help me!"

He fell on his knees beside her, sobbing bitterly,

kissing her hand that was red with housework. She drew it away from him.

"Oh, help me, help me!" he moaned. "I can't live without you."

She found herself stroking his head, as one rubs a bruise for a child. Unable to contain herself any longer she bent over and kissed him. He clutched her hand tightly.

"What shall we do?" he said. "Tell me."

She meditated. "We'll catch the boat to-night to Palermo. You can do a lot in five weeks."

"But the house . . . the rent?"

"You can always trust me to look after the practical side."

"And the Trenellis?"

"Leave them to me!" she replied, with a certain fierce satisfaction.

Mr. Walcot Goes Home

MR. LUDLOW WALCOT, the proprietor of Walcot's World-famed Antacid, took his calling—which was that of a modern captain of industry—religiously, and enlarged on it with eloquence.

Whenever he engaged a new employee in his office he delivered a miniature lecture on this theme. "If you're going to make a success of a business career," he told them, "you've got to be single-minded. You've got to forget yourself; to look at every darned thing you see, not through your own eyes, mind, but through the eyes of your potential customer. In other words, you must have imagination. Imagination! That's the big word in business. Particularly in the patent-medicine business. If you use it properly—as a servant, mind, not as a master—it can give you, right here in this office, all the poetry and romance that you need. If you asked me for two words in which to describe the perfect business-man, I should call him an Imaginative Realist." At this point Mr. Walcot invariably looked at his watch, and shook hands. "When once you've got that idea fixed," he would say in conclusion, "you may consider that your feet are firmly planted on the

Ladder that Leads to Success.”

In Mr. Walcot's own case the Ladder that Led to Success had been in the nature of an express elevator, that had lifted him, in almost record time, from a basement in First Avenue, New York City, to one of the highest floors of the MacCormick Building, on Fifth. Single-minded as he was, it was Fortune who had pressed the button. The very violence and suddenness of his elevation beggared the imagination which, he believed, had achieved it. He lived and moved in a curiously exalted, isolated world, shot like an aerial shuttle between his office on Fifth Avenue, which resembled a millionaire's apartment, and his bachelor apartment on Park, which resembled a business-man's office. He moved in a vicious circle so rapid that he hadn't even time to realize how rich he was. It was only during his hurried passage between these two high perches—he always walked, wheel-traffic moved too slowly—that Ludlow Walcot's feet had any contact with his mother earth. All day and all night (for not even his dreams were his own) his giddy brain was assailed by business details which hammered at it with the persistence of a riveting-machine, his stomach insulted by snacks and patent nerve-foods that jostled each other in competing for the attention of his bewildered digestion.

Among his business acquaintances he had no intimates; if they called him Lud rather than Ludlow it was not because they loved him but just to save time. These

men had diversions—golf, riding, theatres, women. Mr. Walcot was not only happy but proud to dispense with all these. His work was his life; so much so, that work was an end in itself. He hadn't even time to ask himself what he was working for. He had power, and never employed it; money, and never spent it; some sense (one must admit) but little more sensibility than a well-regulated machine.

Now even machines need rest, and flesh and blood, alas! is more fallible than metal. When an engine knocks or over-heats, or utters strange grinding noises, the wise amateur switches off current and calls in an expert. Ludlow Walcot's engine knocked persistently; but the din of the riveting machine in his brain prevented him from hearing its protests, with the result that, early one afternoon, his confidential secretary discovered him gracefully reposing in a pool of blood. A duodenal ulcer. Dame Nature's acid comment on Walcot's World-famed Antacid.

They put Ludlow Walcot in a clinic and starved him for a fortnight, a proceeding that filled him with contempt for the science of surgery. A properly organized industry should carry spare parts. "What I'm asking you for," he persisted, "is a quick cure." "There's no such thing," the surgeon told him sardonically, "as a quick cure for quick lunches. Nature has her own methods."

The methods of Nature proved slower than those of

modern business; which seems to imply that modern business has something wrong about it, but that was a suggestion which Ludlow Walcot refused to admit. All through his first fortnight in bed the riveting-machine continued its automatic stutter. Starvation made his brain preternaturally active. Ideas kept roaring through it like trains through the subway. Even the surgeon's *bot mot* suggested a new line of business. *Walcot's Antacid, the only quick cure for quick lunches.* He saw himself and the surgeon as figures in a page advertisement—with complete honesty, for the World-famed Antacid was practically the only patent remedy which he had never taken.

At the end of a fortnight the hæmorrhage recurred. "You've been worrying again," said the surgeon. "For heaven's sake try to make your mind a blank. If you go on like this you'll soon have something to worry about."

That second hæmorrhage took the starch out of Ludlow. He was frightened to think what would happen to the business if he pegged out. They put him quiet, finally, with an injection of morphine. That evening the night-nurse was spared her usual lecture on office organization. The patient lay on his back and snored contentedly. Though nobody would have imagined it, this was the pleasantest sight she had seen for weeks.

But, while he lay doped and snored, Ludlow Walcot was dreaming. For the first time in thirty years it was

not a business-dream. He was dreaming, in fact, of his mother, to whose memory he had not given a single thought since first the machine got hold of him. It must have been composed, that dream, of things she had told him in the days of his humble childhood over on the East Side. Even so, the setting of his dream seemed strange to him. They were walking hand in hand through a queer green silence; a silence more intense than any that he could remember. So silent it was that his mind (the divided mind of his morphine-dream) suggested that he wasn't really dreaming at all, but was dead. That would explain, of course, why his mother was with him. If death were like this, he thought, heaven wasn't too bad. But the country through which they went, though it certainly didn't resemble any he knew, was an earthly country, a landscape of rolling hills with great fleeces of woodland; behind them the trough of a valley, a river that shone through weaving mists, and beyond the river, on a scarp that resembled the Palisades of the Hudson, a red-roofed town from which rose a church-tower of warm stone. The air they breathed was the air of evening, thin and clear. A cool wind moved the mist from the river, the smoke from the red-roofed township. At the brow of the hill they halted; his mother stretched out her hand. Her voice—how well he remembered!—was the voice that he knew. "Look, darling," she said, "that's Ludlow. That's the last we shall see of it. Sometimes when the bells are ringing, you can hear

them here. Now we bear to the right, and in half a mile we shall come to the turning for Walcot."

"Ludlow? Walcot? When he heard these words, the critical part of his mind, the one that was half-awake, asserted itself. Here was proof, if such proof were needed, that this was a dream. It was typical of a dream's irrelevance that his mind should be playing tricks with his own name. Yet, dreaming or no, the atmosphere of this strange experience was so pleasant, so friendly, so tinged with the gentle melancholy of the sweet dead woman's presence, that Mr. Walcot surrendered himself to it, trying to recapture the continuity which the conscious critic had broken, yet forbidding himself to think, for fear of waking.

He sighed with relief to feel it returning. Yes, the shadowy woman was there at his side again. But the landscape had changed—just as when in a train, one's attention flags for a moment, and returning consciousness shows one new houses, new fields, new skylines. The road now was narrow, its surface channelled by stormwater; the hedges unkempt with roses and vines of honeysuckle. So sweet an air! So bland, so healing a silence! And only they two together—himself and the sweet dead woman whose voice he remembered! "Now we are nearly there," she whispered softly. "Nearly where?" "At Walcot," she said, with a smile that had mockery in it, as though she, too, were in the joke.

And then, in a moment, the sky went black as night.

In the next it was pierced by the headlights of an automobile. The car was coming towards them, whirling downhill; its white beams displayed the heaped hedges, the space between them alive with fluttering moths. The lane was so narrow, the car's speed so wild that they could not escape it; in another second it must surely overwhelm them. From somewhere deep down Mr. Walcott tried to summon his voice. He wanted to shout, to warn the mad driver somehow. He shouted at the top of his voice, but no voice came. There was a crash; then deeper darkness. He was awake. The night-nurse was patting his hand: "There, there!" He was crying like a child.

"My dope appears to suit you," said the surgeon, smiling, next morning.

"I dreamed like hell," Mr. Walcott grumbled.

"About business?"

"No, not about business. Tell me, doc, what was that stuff you gave me? I'd like some more of it."

The surgeon shook his head. "Not unless you need it."

Next night Mr. Walcott concentrated his strength on trying to will himself back into his dream. He wanted to know what happened next. That crash was like the last paragraph of a serial instalment. But no dream came, that night or any night. He slept like a child; perhaps from sheer tiredness. At the end of a week they allowed him to get up. He began to hanker after

his arrears of correspondence.

"No, no, you don't!" the surgeon laughed at him. "The next part of your cure is a sea voyage. You'll be on a diet, of course; but that can be arranged all right. It's a trifle late in the season for the Mediterranean. What about England? That'll be quiet and soothing. I suppose you've been there often?"

"Never been east of Long Island or west of Saint Louis," Mr. Walcot answered. "I'm a New Yorker."

"But you must be of English extraction to judge by your name."

"My mother was born there, I don't know about my father."

"There's a place called Ludlow in Shropshire, England. Ever read poetry, Mr. Walcot?"

"I've not made a habit of it," Mr. Walcot admitted. "In business, you know . . ."

The doctor began to quote:

*"When smoke blew off from Ludlow
And mist blew off from Teme . . ."*

he chanted.

"Say that again, doc!" Mr. Walcot was agitated. "How does it go on?"

"Now there you've got me," the surgeon smiled. "In business, you know . . ."

But Mr. Walcot was not smiling. There, in that sterile little room, he saw—not the white-robed surgeon, the attendant nurse, the hard light beating

through a window framed in brown stone, but a dream-landscape of folding hills and fleeced woodland, a red-roofed town with smoke blowing away from it, a river, wreathed in mist. He lay with eyes wide, staring, trying to fix it. One gleam, and it was gone. He quickly recovered himself.

"You say there's a place called Ludlow," he said. "What's that other place, Teme?"

"The Teme is a river, I think. The poem's by a man named Housman."

"A river," Mr. Walcot repeated. "I might have known it! I fancy I've found my ticket, doc. If I've got to go anywhere I'm going to have a look at that place. I've a feeling that something might come of it. You never know."

"You sound like a man of imagination, Mr. Walcot."

"Imagination," Mr. Walcot began to explain, "is the Big Word in business. Suppose you ask them to send me a list of sailings?"

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As the capital of a World Empire Mr. Walcot found London disappointing. Of course, he admired the traffic-cops who regulated the stream of vehicles outside the Majestic Hotel. But he'd heard about them before till he was sick of it, and, admirable as they were, their efficiency didn't atone for the slowness of the elevators, the washiness of the coffee, and the fact that in all that vast building there was no place, as far as

he could see, where you could get your shoes cleaned. He had been polishing them surreptitiously on the bedroom curtains for a week before he discovered the proper procedure, which was to put them at night outside your bedroom door, whither they returned next morning, miraculously, but by no means efficiently cleaned. Incidentally, he discovered also that Oxfords were called shoes. The valet who explained all this to him, was kind, but condescending. It was this universal mingling of kindness with condescension that got his goat.

In spite of their affectation of superiority, the British seemed willing to learn. The theatres, he noticed, were full of last year's Broadway successes; the movies appeared to feature nothing but American films; and, contrary to what he had heard of European customs, his hotel put on a real American breakfast. But, oh, the abysmal loneliness of it all! He found himself eavesdropping whenever, in the street or in the hotel-lounge, he heard the authentic accent of New York. As he tramped the city he found a guilty delight in entering the shops that proclaimed themselves American Drug-stores. Of course, they weren't really drug-stores, nor yet American. They sold no tobacco, no soft-drinks—nothing but drugs. Still, even if he *was* on a holiday, he couldn't avoid business entirely; in spite of the customs duty England was a field worth exploiting. He returned from his tours of inspection with no fewer than eighteen bottles of the World-famed Antacid, pur-

chased at double the normal price. "Every little helps," he thought, as he emptied them regretfully down the bath.

At the end of a week he felt he was through with London. He had been keeping Ludlow, the real objective of his tour, in the background of his mind. He had a feeling that if he were too eager the place might vanish into thin air, just like his dream. As for Walcot, he felt its existence to be even less stable; he wasn't sure, in fact, that it existed at all. In a curiously adventurous spirit he presented himself at a tourist agency. The Englishman behind the counter, like all the rest of them, was condescending but kind.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked politely.

"I want—say, I want to know if you've ever heard of a place called Ludlow, Shropshire."

"Ludlow? Why, certainly. It's a charming little town."

Mr. Walcot flushed. So there! It was true, after all! He felt like a boy who has been stalking a butterfly and has it under his hat. Not to let it escape; that was the next business!

"Can you get there by rail?"

"Of course, sir. Great Western Railway."

"I'd like you to get me a reservation for to-night; one lower berth Pullman."

"You'll hardly need that, sir," said the young man kindly, "it's only four hours from London. First-class, I suppose? In this country, you know, most people

travel Third nowadays. Is there anything else?"

His tone was so encouraging that Mr. Walcot went on: "You don't happen to know if there's a place near Ludlow called Walcot?"

"Walcot . . . I don't think so." The clerk consulted a Railway Guide. He shook his head. "No, no. There isn't a station called Walcot. If you give me time I might find out if there's any village. Suppose you give me your name and address. I'll telephone later."

"Why, that's fine. Majestic Hotel, room four hundred and two," Mr. Walcot dictated deliberately.

"Four hundred and two. Very good, sir. And the name?"

"Well . . . the name's Ludlow Walcot."

"I see." The young man looked up and beamed on Mr. Walcot's blushes. He was not only a kind but also a romantic young man. A most exceptional young man, Mr. Walcot decided. These English, when once you got through their starch, weren't so bad. Within five minutes they had become such good friends that Mr. Walcot had invited him to lunch and he had accepted. London was no longer the desolation which he had imagined. He began to feel almost proud of his English extraction. He would like to show this man Park Avenue and the Manhattan skyline. And the clerk, on his side, was crazy for Mr. Walcot to see the English countryside.

"If I were you, sir," he said, "I should get a car. You needn't buy one: you can hire it by the week and

drive it yourself. I'll give you an itinerary—through Oxford and over the Cotswolds. When you get up to Ludlow, you can just poke about as you please. The hotels are nothing to shout about, but at least they're clean. I'll get you a couple of large-scale maps. If there is a place called Walcot you'll be sure to find it. When you come back I shall be interested to know what has happened."

"By the way," Mr. Walcot remarked. "I think you might just as well reserve my state-room on the *Acarnania*. I've got to get back in harness by the tenth of July. I'll stop in and pick it up when I come back here."

"D'you know, sir, I don't think I'd make a definite reservation if I were you," said the young man gravely.

"Oh, rats!" Mr. Walcot replied.

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Two days later, having hired an American six-cylinder two-seater, with a right-handed drive, from a young man more elegant yet no less polite than his original friend, Mr. Walcot set out westward from London. Although it was some years since he had used a car, he found the problem of driving through London traffic far less difficult than he had anticipated. He solved it by never venturing out of his lowest gear, and clinging like grim death to the tail of a heavy motor-van just in front of him. He could have followed that van blindfolded, for it was loaded, only too obviously,

with fish. Still, fish or no fish, it was a godsend. Whenever it stopped he stopped; when it started he started. When, after a few miles of congested road, it swung southward and left him, Mr. Walcot actually felt as though he had lost a friend.

The clerk in the tourist-office had given him a detailed description of the road from London to Oxford with a little sketch-map on which he had marked all the main points of interest. That road, he had explained, was one of the grand old coaching highways and bristled with history. As far as Mr. Walcot was concerned, it might just as well have been brand-new. When once the fish-van had abandoned him and he had dared, in the thinning traffic, to change up to "second," his hands, his feet, his eyes, his whole mental and physical organization were grimly concentrated on compelling himself to drive on the wrong side of the road. It violated his reason and all his better instincts to keep to the left and overtake on the right. Not that Mr. Walcot was in danger of overtaking anything; no power on earth could have persuaded him to change up again into "top"; but whenever he saw another vehicle approaching the sense of being where he had no right to be so oppressed him that he stalled his engine—with the result that when, six hours later, and with a boiling radiator, he crawled into Oxford, having covered the distance at a pace of ten miles an hour, he felt like a racing motorist emerging from a speed-trial on Daytona beach, and had no more idea of what rural England

looked like than when he started.

"After Oxford," his friend had told him, "you'll cross a range of hills called the Cotswolds." For all that I shall see of them, Mr. Walcot grimly reflected, they might just as well be the Alps. Whenever he met a policeman a sense of guilt overwhelmed him. Strange though it seemed, however, nobody arrested him, and by the time of the afternoon when English people take tea Mr. Walcot was actually beginning to take notice and drive at a steady thirty without keeping his eye on the road.

As he went on, a sense of having lost time compelled him to drive even faster. The road surface was excellent, as smooth as a billiard-table; the thin upland air exhilarating after that of London, and threaded with songs of larks. A wide, rolling country it was, not unlike Pennsylvania as he had seen it from a train going westward from Philadelphia; and those small stone villages, their gabled and mullioned cottages emerging from heaped lilacs and spires of hollyhocks, were certainly cute. They were so quiet, so orderly, so somnolent in the sweet hush of the afternoon, that it seemed sacrilegious to drive through them at speed.

Now that he had finally mastered the English rule-of-the-road and the "feel" of his car, Mr. Walcot was actually in a position to enjoy their individual beauties. They tempted him to speculate on the joys of possession. "If I bought me a cottage like that, now," he was thinking, "and a bit of a garden, with some steady

middle-aged body to keep house! One could sit in the garden evenings and smoke a cigar and listen to the birds. Well, one might do worse."

But this, as his better self told him, was mere sentimentalizing; the pursuit of a pretty idea that appealed to the surface of his mind. Peaceful and lovely though this country seemed, there was nothing in it that clutched at his heart and dragged it out by the roots. He didn't belong to it, could never belong to it. He knew those picturesque cottages! It was probable that not one in five hundred possessed a bathroom, much less up-to-date plumbing or steam-heating or electric refrigeration. All this talk about "calls of the blood" was simply bunk. He had always described himself as a hundred per cent American. At that moment the percentage had risen to a hundred and fifty. Probably, by the time he had got to Ludlow, it would reach two hundred.

Would it? There was a soft and treacherously unpatriotic streak in his mind—some legacy, no doubt, of that troublesome dream—which made him hope, against hope, that, somehow, it wouldn't.

If Mr. Walcot had known the truth, he would have realized that the imagination on which he prided himself was fighting already against the forces of disillusion. He experienced an authentic and not unpleasant thrill when, suddenly, in the early evening, he came face to face with a single signpost pointing to Ludlow. The sight of his own name in print had always

stirred him; its appearance here, in the heart of a foreign country, gave him quite a peculiar shiver. He had the feeling that he had reached the verge of an experience as alarming and fascinating as that of his dreams. That signpost threw him a challenge, to which he responded by determining firmly to behave like a reasonable business man.

Yet, even so, he knew that his reason was being undermined; that traitor influences were already at work. The evening light had begun to play tricks with the landscape. In the Cotswolds he had found a colourable imitation, in excellent taste, of Eastern Pennsylvania. This country, on the other hand, was unlike anything he had known—unlike, and yet, somehow, most piercingly familiar! How could it possibly be familiar? It wasn't, quite definitely, for instance, the landscape of his dream. What was the quality in it that made his spine tingle—that caught his breath, made his heart beat faster, and set his brain swimming in an unreal light-headedness? Perhaps he was merely hungry. He pulled up at a wayside inn and ordered bread and cheese and a pint of beer.

But even when he had eaten he felt just as uncertain of himself. He had done nothing, in fact, but waste time and light. At this rate, if he were not careful, he wouldn't reach Ludlow before dark. It didn't occur to him to make allowances for the long English twilight. That twilight gave to the landscape a curious effect of suspended life. It cast upon everything (or was that,

perhaps, the beer?) an eerie, magical bloom. Every mile that he went—and now he was hurrying—he felt surer and surer that he was on the verge of some shattering experience. Even so, the actual experience burst upon him unprepared.

At a sudden turn of the twisting road, where the enveloping fringe of woods made a dusk, he found himself shot out suddenly into the remains of daylight. The whole world opened up before him in wide, blue spaces. And there, at his feet, he saw what he had seen before. A landscape of rolling hills, fleeced with undulant woodlands, the trough of a valley, a river that shone through weaving mists; and beyond the river, on a steep scarp, a town with red roofs, from which rose a church tower of warm stone. The air that he breathed was the thin, clear air of evening. Its eddies moved the mist from the river, the smoke from the red-roofed township. *Ludlow* . . . he rammed on his brakes so violently that he almost skidded. He stood up in the car and stared. "My God," he said, "my God!"

From that moment, Mr. Walcot acted not like himself, but like a man inspired or fey. He jumped out of the car and strutted up and down the roadway, eagerly, excitedly grasping this astounding moment in which dream and consciousness were one. Was he still conscious, or was he, verily, dreaming? He didn't know. He didn't care. All that he knew was that he held in his hand the dream, the captured butterfly that had once escaped him. This time it shouldn't elude him,

even in the dark! He, Ludlow Walcot, was going to add Walcot to Ludlow; to complete his dream, if he died in the attempt.

Even if the blessed light failed, he must go through with it now. He was hot on the trail, like a hound, and nothing should stop him. And what, after all, did light matter? He knew his way. Every inch of it—every bush, every stone seemed familiar. He could follow it as easily as the way from Park Avenue to his office. Park Avenue, his office—had they ever really existed?

He jumped into the car again and restarted. A sinister jolting informed him that a tyre was punctured. Swearing with unaccustomed fluency he jumped out and began to change the rim. The key was missing. He had to move the nuts with a shifting-spanner. He wouldn't half give that polite young man hell when he got back to London! By the time he had finished his job it was almost dark. That, as he had already decided, didn't matter. Nothing at all mattered now, except getting to Walcot. He switched on his headlights gaily; but no light came. The batteries must be spent or the connections broken. Frustrated, yet more determined than ever, he crept on through the dark.

Every yard that he went brought its new thrill of recognition. Those shadowy briars, those vines of honeysuckle, how well he knew them! Outside himself, he heard himself chuckling like a madman. What did it matter? It was coming—the moment was coming!

It came, as a matter of fact, far sooner than he had

expected. At the bottom of the next valley the blackness of the lane was suddenly pierced by the headlights of an automobile. Another car was coming towards him, whirling madly downhill. It filled all the narrow lane with its light and the roar of its engine. Some madman was driving it. Mr. Walcot shouted to warn him—he shouted at the top of his voice, and realized, in the same moment, that he himself was on the wrong side of the road. Too late—for the end of his shout was drowned in a crash and the sound of splintered glass. He heard just that. And then nothing.

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Mr. Walcot became conscious of a familiar, sharp, sweet smell. For a long while it puzzled him. Of course, he decided at last, it was the smell of the clinic in Fifty-fourth Street. He had been dreaming about Ludlow, the road to Walcot, and a motor accident. He had dreamt the same thing before. "But this second dream," he thought, "is much fuller, more complicated. There's London," he thought, "and those hills—the what's-his-names—and a punctured tyre." (They must surely have given him another squirt of that dope without his knowing it.) "All I have to do," he thought, "to straighten this out is to open my eyes. Then I shall see the good old brownstone houses on the north side of the street." But he couldn't open his eyes; that was the mean part of it. It hurt him even to think of opening them.

When he did open them, finally, he knew for certain that he was dreaming. The room was low-ceilinged, with great oak beams across it; the window, which ought to have been on the right, was on his left. It was a case-ment window, with small panes; and through it he saw, not brownstone houses, but a green hillside; trees swaying in a breeze, and black cows trailing slowly towards him. When a man sees black cows feeding in West Fifty-fourth Street there's something wrong with his brain. The problem was too complicated for Mr. Walcot to grapple with. He resigned himself—with reservations.

A little later he became aware of voices, a man's and a woman's, both speaking with an affected English accent. The man was giving medical instructions, and must be a doctor; but when Mr. Walcot opened his eyes—without pain, this time—he saw that his visitor couldn't be a doctor after all. He was not dressed in a white overall, as a doctor should be, but in riding kit; and the person with whom he was talking, a tall, dark, quiet-faced woman in the late twenties, was also, to judge by her clothing, not a nurse.

"He's lain quiet as a lamb all day," she was telling the other visitor. "But so far he's shown no sign of consciousness. He can't surely go on like this much longer?"

The other shook his head. "I don't think the skull's fractured," he said. "Merely serious concussion. In any case, the poor chap is lucky to have escaped with his

life. I had a look at the car when I passed this morning. It's simply scrap-iron. You can see for yourself he was on the wrong side of the road. By this evening I expect the police will have found out more about him."

"The wrong side of the road? The police?" Mr. Walcot thought. A cold fear seized him. Was he, the most law-abiding man imaginable, wanted by the police?

"You've discovered his name, of course?" the doctor was asking.

"Yes, and that's the most ridiculous part of it," the woman answered. "It appears to be Ludlow Walcot." She laughed softly.

"Ludlow Walcot? The whole thing's fantastic! It sounds like a joke."

"Oh, *does* it?" thought Mr. Walcot. "You'd find it a joke, no doubt, to be smashed up like this, and then be wanted by the police!"

"But what I can't explain," the pleasant voice went on softly, "is how the poor creature managed to get on to our road at all. It doesn't lead anywhere, you see, except to this house. What on earth was he doing here? That's what puzzles me."

"If you're half as puzzled as I am, sweetie," thought Mr. Walcot, "I'll hand you a hundred dollars right now."

"It's quite obvious, of course, that he's an American?"

"Oh, yes. You've only to look at his clothes to see that."

"The devil you have!" thought Mr. Walcot indignantly. "That suit cost a hundred and twenty of the best."

"From the papers in his pocket," she went on, "we imagine he must have been travelling for some patent medicine. *Walcot's World-famed Antacid*. Now that's where you ought to be able to help me, doctor."

"Never heard of the stuff in my life," the other answered grimly. "Of course the whole world is flooded with rubbish of that sort."

These words, and the contemptuous tone in which they were uttered, shattered the last fragments of Mr. Walcot's complacency. To criticize his clothes, to call him a joke was bad enough. To have his Antacid described as rubbish was more than he could stand for. Pain or no pain, he opened his eyes and his mouth together.

"See here, do you call yourself a doctor?" he spluttered furiously.

Their surprise was so great that the woman gave a jump and uttered a little "Oh!" The doctor, on the other hand, appeared to be unmoved. He approached Mr. Walcot with a smile.

"So you've come round at last," he said. "Good morning. How are you?"

"D'you mean to tell me," Mr. Walcot proceeded angrily, "that you, a doctor, have never heard of Walcot's Antacid?"

The doctor shook his head gently.

"I'm afraid I haven't. I imagine you happen to be connected with it in some way?"

"I own it," said Mr. Walcot, with simple grandeur.

"Well, now that you've wakened up," said the doctor calmly, "if I were you I should try to go to sleep again."

His outburst had exhausted him so much that Mr. Walcot submitted.

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All through that day he slept quietly. On the next, apart from a general feeling of shakiness and the tension of the twelve catgut sutures that decorated his scalp, he was almost himself again. The sporting doctor, who rode over the hills to see him each morning, insisted, however, on his staying in bed for a few more days.

"Your whole body and mind have had an almighty shaking up, you know," he said; "and in fairness to Miss Mary, who's nursed you like an angel through the bad time when we didn't know if you'd ever come round, that's the least you can do."

Once more Mr. Walcot submitted; partly because, in spite of his woeful ignorance of modern medicaments, the doctor had proved himself to be an extremely good sort; partly, again, because he had never in his life been happier or more comfortable than in that place and at that moment; and principally, it must be confessed, be-

cause, as soon as he ceased to be an invalid, he could no longer honestly consent to be looked after by the girl whom the doctor and he himself called Miss Mary.

The prospect of returning, as he surely must return, to his bleak hotel in London, filled him with terror. The peace of that remote farmhouse, that little room, which now smelt of jasmine and lavender rather than of antiseptics; the view through the open casement where a dimity curtain fluttered in the lightest and warmest of breezes; that vista of green hillside, with black cattle grazing, filled him with a slow peace that passed all understanding. The very sounds of the place were soft and reassuring: the chorus of birds at dawn, aerial notes of lazy cuckoos, fluting of thrush, whistles of blackbird: the whirr of the cream-separator, the rumble of a churn, the solemn *chunk-chunk* of the farmyard pump, the soft trampling and lowing of cows coming home to be milked—all these were leisurely and stable and, somehow, home-like.

Yes, that was the true explanation. He felt he had just come home. His Park Avenue apartment, in spite of the excellent service, had never deserved the consecration of that word. Perhaps, Mr. Walcot thought, the real reason was because there was no woman in it. No woman, that is, with whom you could sit and talk, as you could with Miss Mary, without an eye on the tyranny of time. At first, Mr. Walcot had found himself excessively shy with her. He wasn't accustomed to women; he'd never had time for them. In his office

his relations with the numerous visions of silk stockings and lipstick which buzzed about him had always been limited by the conviction that in business that sort of thing wouldn't do. He had never been intimate with any woman except his mother, and that was so long ago! His attitude towards them had always been one of distrust and severity.

But, for numerous reasons, he couldn't be severe with Miss Mary. To begin with, the fact that he was almost wholly dependent on her, not only for the delicious country food which she brought him but for all his contacts with the outer world. And then, again, she was unlike all other women. She was so natural: no hint of paint or powder; no sidelong alluring glances; no feminine coquetry. Her eyes—they were blue, like his mother's—were as open and honest as day. She was graceful; the movements of her slim body enchanted him. She had beautiful hands—not only gentle and capable, but beautiful, unlike those rouged and enamelled talons that he knew and detested. Moreover, in spite of the fact that they were never idle, her hands were soft. He was finding occasion to notice a lot of things.

At first, when he was so weak, she had treated him with a certain maternal authority, tempering her kindness with an adorable severity, forbidding him to tire himself with talking. But later, when everybody but the doctor would have admitted that he was himself again, she consented to sit for long hours—how short

they seemed!—and talk with him.

It was Mr. Walcot, as a matter of fact, who did most of the talking; for Miss Mary, among her other accomplishments, was an admirable listener. He talked to her, of course, about his business; its small beginnings; his bold advertising campaigns; all about the Ladder that Leads to Success and Imagination being the Big Word in business. Sometimes he caught her smiling at his Americanisms. It was worth while to see her smile in any case.

"Tell me," he said, "do I strike you as being noticeably American? In my speech I mean?"

"Sometimes," she told him. "At others you'd never guess it."

A month ago he wouldn't have taken that as a compliment. Now, strange to say, he very nearly did.

Little by little they proceeded to further intimacies. It was a novel luxury to Mr. Walcot to lay bare the bottom—or very nearly the bottom—of his heart. He talked a great deal about his mother. Then Mary's eyes softened. Finally, with a strange thrill, he told her of the dream that had lured him to England, of his pilgrimage to Ludlow; all the events of that amazing evening which had brought him to her door.

"And the deuce of it is," he concluded, "I'm not sorry for it, mind you, Miss Mary—the deuce of it is that I never got to Walcot after all!"

"But you *did* get to Walcot," she cried, with her eyes ablaze. "You *did* get to Walcot. Don't you realize?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, *this* is Walcot," she said. "My name is Walcot. We must be distant relations."

He prayed to goodness that the relationship might be reasonably remote. He remembered, anxiously, that a man may not marry his grandmother. . . .

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At the end of a week, when first he tottered downstairs, he had full opportunity of judging what Walcot was like. No wonder the young man in the tourist agency had been unable to find it! Walcot was not the name of a village or hamlet, but of this isolated farmhouse. A beautiful house, he decided. Grey stone, set in a garden tangled out of sheer luxuriance. The rooms were low and raftered with tremendous oak. Above the porch, carved in freestone, he read two initials and a date: *L.W. 1670*. He read them and stared at them meditatively.

"Well, anyway, those won't need to be altered," he thought. Old-world charm was all very well, but what about comfort? To begin with, a modern man could not live without electricity. A little gasoline plant in the barn over there, with, perhaps, a subsidiary windmill on a steel tripod. With power they could do their separating, and churning, and wood-sawing. They could even cook with it. Then a telephone. How could anyone possibly exist without telephones? And steam-heating. Those great chimneys were like the ventilating

shafts of a liner. The garden, as well, would have to be cleaned up properly. He remembered a garden that had taken his fancy last year on Long Island. Long, vine-wreathed pergolas; smooth lawns, dotted with statues and big earthenware vases from Italy. Of course it would take a bit of money. Money? He'd pots of it!

Of course it would be foolish to spend money on other people's property. He broached the matter warily one evening. He was so carried away by his programme of improvements that he didn't even notice the mixture of despair and amusement that it produced on her face.

"Now, naturally, this is all in the air, Cousin Mary," he said. "But somehow I've a hunch that I'd like to buy Walcot and put it in order."

She shook her head solemnly: "I'm afraid it isn't for sale."

"Oh, rats, Mary. Money does everything. If once I get hold of the owner's lawyers, I'll bet you I get it."

"Why not talk to the owner herself?" she asked, with a smile.

"Sure, let's have her address."

"I'm the owner, Cousin Ludlow," she said. "But I'm not selling Walcot."

.

The place had been left her three years earlier, she told him, by an elderly cousin considerably less distant than himself. Up to that time, she said, she had been

in business, which explained, incidentally, her sympathy and understanding for his.

"I had saved a little money," she said, "just enough, with great care, to set myself up as a farmer. I suppose there was something in my blood that attracted me to Walcot, just the same sort of thing as fetched you across the Atlantic. When first I came to look at it I felt as if a dream had come true. And nothing in the world," she said, "is going to rob me of my dream."

Well, dreams were all very well in moderation, "But just think of the discomfort," he said, "when winter comes round! Why don't you be sensible, Mary, and let me put it in order for you? That idea of buying—well, it was just an idea. But I owe you a lot, you know; and a trifle—say ten thousand dollars—would revolutionize everything."

She shook her head. "I don't want revolution," she said. "I'm perfectly contented."

It was at this moment that Mr. Walcot had his inspiration. He realized, suddenly, that it was the moment for which he had been waiting. With a feeling of desperate elation he spoke again:

"Well, if you won't have my help as a friend, there's another way. You know that I love you, of course. Will you marry me, Mary?"

She looked him full in the face with her honest eyes. They were firm yet kind.

"Not if you're going to spoil Walcot, Cousin Ludlow," she said.

Mr. Walcott heaved a sigh of relief. Even if her answer was qualified it didn't spell absolute rejection. He was so pitifully in love that he would have been prepared to throw comfort to the winds and shiver through all the remaining winters of his life for the sake of Mary's company. Fortunately, at that instant, a message arrived that snatched her away from him to attend to some detail of farm business. Fortunately, also, that very night the wolfish English summer discarded its lamb-skins. The peerless weather broke in torrents of icy rain. Hour after hour, as Mr. Walcott lay sleepless, wind howled down the enormous chimneys, and water, blown under the slates, dripped dismally on to his nose.

That night Ludlow Walcott did more thinking than he had done in years. Of two things he was certain. The first, that he was too old, too fixed in his habits, too cowardly to live through the winter at Walcott. The second that he was incapable of living through any winter anywhere without Mary. If an irresistible force meets an immovable obstacle? The result, on a spiritual plane, resembled his motor smash. It was a humble, a shattered Mr. Walcott, who met her at breakfast next morning. She was sorry for him, quite obviously; but also quite immovable.

"I wonder," he suggested mildly, "if you'd have any objection to my having the roof mended?"

"No, of course, you poor dear. Did it leak? I'm dreadfully sorry. I'll send into Ludlow to-day and get

a man to repair it."

That morning the doctor arrived, soaked but cheerful. "Fine growing weather," he said. "This nice drop of rain will save our barley, Mr. Walcot." His visit, he said, was purely a matter of form. Anyone could see that Mr. Walcot was now fit to travel. He suggested the railway in preference to a motor-car this time. A joke in bad taste.

"What about your bill, sir?" Mr. Walcot asked him shortly.

"Oh, that'll be all right. Just give me your London address."

London! Once more the vision of that hostile hotel rose before him. The "nice drop of rain" continued to save the barley incessantly for the next twelve hours, simultaneously nourishing the growth of Mr. Walcot's misery. When the doctor spoke gaily of London, he had stolen a glance at Mary, hoping to find in her face some shadow of pity or regret. In vain, her eyes were pitiless, and lovelier than ever.

Next day the rain continued just as persistently. He wandered about the dark house, cold, bored to distraction. He watched Mary's cheerful activities—the rain didn't worry her—with puzzled helplessness. There wasn't even a book in the house that he could settle to read, though whether that was the fault of the books or of Mary he couldn't decide. That idle day added a third horn to his dilemma. In addition to the fact that he couldn't live at Walcot with Mary, or anywhere

without her, he discovered a third; that, with Mary or without her, he couldn't forsake his business. The second biggest thing in his life was the World-famed Antacid.

On the surface one might have thought that this third complication would have made his problem more hopeless than ever. On the contrary it offered him a miraculous, a triumphant solution. But then, Mr. Walcot's strong suit was imagination. That evening, when the wind blew the smoke of the chimney in their faces and rain spat in the open fire, he expounded his plan methodically.

"See here, Cousin Mary," he said, "I've been thinking a lot."

"So that's how you look when you're thinking?" she teased him gently.

"First of all, I want you to know that I've come round to your way of thinking about Walcot."

"Oh?" she smiled faintly. Her eyes were amused, but triumphant.

"Why, I'd certainly give up anything to get you, Mary. You know that already. But there's one thing more—a thing that an intelligent woman like you, who's been in business, will perfectly understand. I have interests at home that run into millions of dollars. You wouldn't expect me to abandon those right off, now would you, Mary?"

"Of course, that wouldn't be reasonable," she agreed.

"Then listen to what I propose. If you'll marry me

now—and if you won't, I wish that darned motor had finished me off—if you'll marry me now, we'll go right off to New York."

"But Walcot . . . ?" she said.

"Oh, bless Walcot! I'm coming to that! Why shouldn't you give me time to settle up all my business; spend the winter, for a couple of years, say, in New York, and hop over here each summer to see how the old place is looking? We'll leave it exactly as you want. I promise you that."

"That's sweet of you, Ludlow."

"In reason, of course. You wouldn't object to one small bathroom, would you?" he asked her humbly.

She laughed. His humility was really too pathetic. She took his hand.

"If you say it like that, my poor dear, I couldn't refuse you anything."

"Then you will? Gosh! Let's fix it up now. Can I telephone to London?"

She laughed. "You forget this is Walcot. If you don't mind the rain we could drive into Ludlow, and send a telegram."

"Mind the rain? Why, with you, I'd go if we had to swim for it."

Three hours later, the clerk in the London tourist agency opened a curious telegram:

Secure double suite Acarnania expense immaterial

wire confirmation immediately to Ludlow Walcott
address Walcott Ludlow.

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Next summer, unfortunately, the pressure of expanding business made it impossible for Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow Walcott to visit Europe. Quite apart from the pressure of business they would have felt it unwise to leave the summer residence which they had begun to build on Long Island. It is a fascinating little place, the exact replica (according to *Homes and Gardens*) of an Old English Farmhouse. It has sixteen bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, a squash-racquet court, a picture gallery, a Pompeian swimming-pool, and Dutch and Italian Gardens. The name of the house, as carved on the Indiana limestone gateway, is simply "Walcot."

"A sentimental fancy of my wife's," says the Imaginative Realist.

Glamour

I

THEY came from some growing city in the State of Minnesota. But that is a small point: they might just as well have come from Virginia, California, or any provincial town in England, Holland, or Scandinavia. They came in pursuit of information and glamour. First they came to Italy, where both were cheap, thanks to the exchange, and plentiful because the Latin peoples are far too civilized to indulge in either themselves. Then, as that wolf in sheep's clothing, the mild Italian winter, discovered itself, they passed on to Egypt, where the most expensive varieties of glamour (and the most expensive varieties of all other kinds of spoof) are to be found. Which is not to be wondered at, seeing that romantic novelists have been thriving for the past three generations on the desert's illimitable freedom, voices from minarets, mystery of veiled women and subtle Oriental perfumes. On sand-flies and sand-storms, blackmail, enteric and Oriental smells they would have starved. And so would some few thousand slothful picturesque and able-bodied dragomans. But that is by the way.

In Italy, as I say, Miss Jenkins and Agatha, her niece, acquired the romantic habit. Miss Jenkins was a middle-aged body, determined but rather stupid. She had read Mr. Wells's *Outline of History* from cover to cover three times. Each time she finished it she said "Dear me!" and sighed, and began again. Agatha, on the other hand, was clever and pretty in an angular way, with fair hair, good teeth, irreproachable ankles. The aunt had once lost a lover and was therefore sentimental, Agatha had recently found one, and left him in cold storage at Chicago. His name was Simeon Jackson. He dealt in real estate. He used to send her long typewritten letters every week; and she, with the help of her diary and a Baedeker, replied with a postal course of European culture as a preparation for matrimony. He had proposed to her three months before she left New York, begging her to marry him before she sailed for Europe, and she had promised to do so on her return.

Nothing, so far, had shaken this resolve: not even that Sicilian barone at Sorrento.

So they reached Egypt, and delivered themselves into the hands of Cook. They sailed up the Nile to Luxor; they rode innumerable donkeys, and Miss Jenkins was seasick on a camel. In the long evenings they read Egyptology and the complete works of Robert Hichens. Then they came back to Cairo to do the museums and Saracen art and buy presents in the bazaars. For this part of the course they had allotted

the fourteen days that must pass before the *Esoteric* sailed from Alexandria for Naples, where they had decided to spend the spring.

It was on the steps of their hotel that they first encountered Achmet. From the first moment Agatha had realized that this was no ordinary dragoman. It was true that he wore the dragoman's green robe; but the robe was of a superior quality of silk. His face, as Agatha noticed, was noble and wistful, like that of the great Akhnaton, Tut-ankh-amen's father-in-law. The cane that he carried had a gold top to it; a blue scarab, an authentic family heirloom, decorated his dusky forefinger. His movements were a dream of dignity and grace. If he were sinister, Agatha told her aunt, it was with the quality of one of Mr. Hichens' heroes.

"But for all that, my dear, he's only a negro," Miss Jenkins said.

"No, Auntie dear, look at his lips," Agatha replied. And she went on to explain that according to Mr. Wells Orientals were of Aryan origin and white in the strictest sense of the word, and that Achmet, anyway, was no ordinary man.

On the first day he proved it. Nothing could have exceeded the courtesy and graciousness with which he piloted them through the labyrinths of the Mouski. He was a personage. All the traders who sat cross-legged in their shops saluted him. He accepted amber cigarettes and Turkish coffee with a regal condescension. He carried the women's dust-cloaks; he even

carried their purses. For safety, he told them: the Mouski was a dangerous quarter. He made such bargains as they could never have hoped to achieve with an ordinary dragoman. His eyes could discriminate in a moment between the genuine and the spurious. And, at the end of the day, when Agatha came to pay him, he revealed the depth of the nobility which she had suspected.

"I cannot take your money," he said. "It has been a privilege to spend the day in the company of such a beautiful lady."

She blushed. She hoped that her aunt had not heard the compliment; but she need not have worried, for Miss Jenkins was surreptitiously counting the money in the purse that Achmet had carried, and foreign currencies always confused her.

"You really must let me pay you," Agatha whispered. The whisper betrayed her into an atmosphere of intimate conspiracy.

"From *you*, never," Achmet replied. "I do not like to touch money. If your aunt cares to put something in an envelope . . . perhaps we will talk about it—tomorrow morning."

Such natural delicacy thrilled her. On the hotel terrace she told her aunt what had happened. "Rubbish," said Miss Jenkins. "I'll ask the concierge how much."

Thirty piastres was the tariff, said the concierge. But that was for an ordinary dragoman and seemed to

Agatha an indignity; so when Miss Jenkins counted out the money Agatha made it up to a hundred from her own purse.

Next morning, at nine o'clock, they found Achmet waiting for them. Agatha slipped the envelope into his hand. He hid it, without looking at it, in the folds of his *burnous*. Agatha felt that she had wounded his pride and wondered how she could make some amends. That morning he did not carry their dust-cloaks, but handed them over to a small brown-headed boy with a cast in his eye. Whenever Achmet spoke to him the boy prostrated himself and kissed his hand. It was a touching and intriguing ceremony.

"Why does he do that?" Agatha enquired when her aunt was safely isolated in a lagoon of Persian carpets.

Achmet smiled languidly.

"Why do you ask?" he said. "I have never told anyone, but I will tell you. The boy, who is my brother, makes this obeisance because I am his *sheik*. You surely did not think that I was Egyptian? I am an Arab. I have royal blood in my veins. In my own tribe I am treated as a king. But please do not tell this to anyone."

"Why shouldn't I tell anyone?" she asked. "You should be proud of it."

"Because it would endanger my life. I have been forced to leave the free life of the desert because the Government consider me a rebel. Disguised in the dragoman's *burnous* I am safe. Now I have placed my

life in your hands. But I know that I can trust you."

"I won't even tell Auntie," she assured him.

He thanked her.

And this was the creature, noble and distressed, whom Miss Jenkins had called a nigger! Agatha thought it all over in the evening as she sat on the balcony of her room at the hotel watching the sunset tinge the minarets of the Mosque of Mohammed Ali, and the white-breasted crows that hopped about in search of crumbs under the jacarandas of the garden beneath her. The fact that he had not only told her his story, but also bound her to secrecy filled her with a curious sensation of pride and responsibility. For the first time in her experience she carried the life of a man in her hands. It thrilled her to think that she had stepped out of the ordinary track that tourists followed into the authentic Egypt of the novelists; she had touched the extreme edge of such a life as her unromantic lover in Chicago could never even imagine.

That evening a letter arrived from Simeon Jackson. It bored her to read it; for though he had signed himself hers affectionately and spoke of kisses, she felt certain it had been dictated to a stenographer or breathed into the latest model of dictaphone. Not even with the aid of Baedeker could it be answered. She was forced to confess that during all that day she had acquired no useful information; her mind was full not of facts, but of glamour; her eyes retained nothing but the memory of Achmet's melancholy dignity; her heart

ached for his misfortunes and longed to share them. She saw him no longer as a distinguished dragoman in a green silk *galabieh*, but as a paladin of the desert riding like a whirlwind round the tents of his tribe on a grey Arab stallion; and on this scene the night of the desert descended with such stars as the New World had never seen.

Next morning there was a cloud in Achmet's eyes. Unreasonably, one might have argued, for in two days he had earned the average wage of seven. Something, Agatha decided, was on his mind; and that was unfortunate, for she had meant to take advantage of their new intimacy by inducing him to tell her at first hand something of that life of illimitable freedom from which the British Government's jealousy had driven him. When she tried to draw him out he only smiled sadly. She could have kicked her aunt for the insensitiveness with which she pestered him for information on the subject of prices. Nothing but royal blood could have taken her vulgarity with such forbearance. If any proof of nobility were lacking, here it was! It was her duty, Agatha felt, to heal the wounds that this callous woman inflicted; and so she schemed to get him for a moment to herself. In the street of the perfume-sellers Miss Jenkins subsided on a settee, like a fat bee drunk with essences, and Agatha hurriedly opened her heart.

"Tell me, Achmet," she said, "what is the matter with you to-day?"

Achmet shook his head mournfully; he smiled and

showed his beautiful teeth. Troubles, he said, never came singly. Surely it was enough that he should have lost his royal birthright and descended to poverty in this city of Cairo where he was nobody. And now, as Allah would have it, another misfortune had fallen on him. The little boy, his brother, was lying dangerously ill. If he had not been compelled to earn money by acting as dragoman to the two American ladies he would not have left him. The doctors of Cairo were heartless and less skilled than the physicians of his tribe. Nothing could save the child but an operation for which they demanded twenty Egyptian pounds. (He was considerate enough to translate the sum into dollars; one hundred, more or less.) He showed her his finger on which the authentic and hereditary scarab no longer gleamed. He had been forced to pledge it to a Jew, who had declared that it was not genuine. All the proceeds had been consumed by the doctor's first visit. There was nothing left.

"I will speak to my aunt about it," said Agatha.

He begged her not to do so. Her aunt was different, so different from herself, and would not understand. Besides that, he had not asked for help. He would never have spoken about the matter unless she had forced him to yield his confidence. And to her, he said, he could refuse nothing.

The news distressed her; the dignified way in which he had conveyed it thrilled her.

"I think I have just enough money in my room at

the hotel," she told him. "I'll see as soon as we get back."

Her offer affronted him. If he had known that she was going to suggest such a thing he would not have told her. The child was ill. If he should die it would only be the will of Allah. *Kismet*. . . . That was how they looked on such things in the desert. Besides, he told her, in any case he could not accept money from her of all women in the world.

"But that is unreasonable, Achmet," she said kindly. "Why not from me?"

He laughed. "Do you want to force me to tell you?"

"I shall respect your confidence," she said. "I shall consider it a privilege."

"Then I will tell you. I cannot take money from you because I love you. No doubt you will think that I am mad. You are proud. But I also have my pride, and reason for pride. Now you know. Do not forget that it is your own fault. You forced me to tell you."

They were standing in the mouth of a little valley debouching on the street of the perfume-sellers where adours of musk and amber made heavy the air. From within the alley came a whisper of wooden spindles spinning silk. Out of this background his words reached her with a curious appropriateness. Her first impulse had been one of resentment that he had dared to address her—her, an American citizen and as good as married.

"You. . . ." she said, flushing up from her neck to

her hair. "How dare you speak to me like that?"

He only smiled, and Agatha, to avoid prolonging the awkwardness, hurried on to rejoin her aunt without another word.

"Would you believe it," Miss Jenkins said. "This villain here actually has the impudence to ask me sixteen dollars for that little spot of attar of roses. Achmet, come and talk sense to him."

Achmet came forward. His declaration seemed to have gone to his head. It made Agatha's anger burn more brightly to see the languid insolence with which he spoke to her aunt. But Miss Jenkins could not see it. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, and this made her more jocular and familiar with him than Agatha had ever been. It sometimes happened that Miss Jenkins made an exhibition of herself like this. Agatha could never bear it, and now least of all; so she turned her back on them and all through an afternoon of endless vulgar bargainings kept herself to herself. All the time Achmet watched her secretly; all the time she was thinking of the liberty he had taken; and by the end of their visit to the Mouski she was beginning to regard his avowal in a gentler light.

Such things, she reflected, had happened before. When she had read of them in novels at Luxor they had thrilled her to death. But the heroes of those novels had been Arab princes, and Achmet was a Cairo dragoman. Achmet was nothing of the sort! Hadn't he told her that he was a noble refugee from the desert?

Hadn't the obeisance of the small brother proved it? Didn't the fineness of his features, the dignity of his gait, the unusual delicacy that he had felt in handling money, all go to prove that he had spoken the truth? It would be wrong, she told herself, to judge him by the standards of poor Mr. Jackson of Chicago; for the love of such a man as Achmet was hot and thirsty as the Sahara, and if her beauty had pleased him he could not be expected to keep silence.

"For I am of the tribe of Ben Asra, who die when they love," she quoted to herself.

In the end it seemed to her, taking his nature into account, that she had been unreasonably rough with him. She must try to make amends; for his admiration, after all, was less of an insult than a compliment. What was more, the picture of the sick brother troubled her. There, at any rate, her duty was plain. As they approached the hotel she fell behind and spoke to him with something of the kindness one would use toward an impetuous child.

"Achmet," she said. "You know that you shouldn't have spoken to me like that; but I forgive you. If you'll just wait on the terrace I'll slip up to my room and see if I can find you the money for that operation. I shan't be five minutes. Will you wait?"

He flew into a passion. "You want to humiliate me," he said, "to give me money here on the terrace in sight of all the other dragomans."

Of course he was a child. She must humour him.

"I didn't think of that," she said. "How shall we manage it?"

"What is the number of your room?" he asked quickly.

She told him and he repeated it.

"I will come in at the back of the hotel after dinner," he said. "In these clothes," he added bitterly, "I cannot enter by the same door as you. I will come upstairs. You will find me outside your room."

She was anxious to spare his feelings. "Very well," she said. "At nine o'clock. Will that do?"

II

At nine-fifteen Miss Jenkins sat digesting an excellent dinner in the hotel lounge. Her feet ached and burned; but not even this discomfort could spoil the triumph of the bargains that Achmet had achieved. It pleased her to think that she was made of stronger stuff than Agatha, who had gone to bed with a headache. In the midst of these reflections the hotel manager, an immaculate Swiss, appeared before her.

"Miss Jenkins," he said. "May I have a word with you?"

"Sure," Miss Jenkins replied.

He spoke with agitation. It was his duty to point out to her that no dragoman was allowed in the hotel. It was a rule to which no exceptions could be made. Miss

Jenkins opened her eyes. What was it all about?

The chambermaid on the third floor, he regretted to tell her, had made a report. The dragoman Achmet, one of the greatest scoundrels in Cairo, had been seen to enter her niece's room. Such a thing could not possibly be tolerated in a respectable hotel. He himself had gone up and verified the facts. The dragoman, it appeared, had come there on the lady's invitation.

"I don't believe it," said Miss Jenkins stoutly.

The manager shrugged his shoulders. Unfortunately there was no room for disbelief. He had seen the man with his own eyes and turned him out. But that was not what he wanted to talk about. Very regretfully he must request Miss Jenkins and her niece to leave the hotel.

"But this is monstrous!" cried Miss Jenkins.

"We have our rules," the manager told her. "I'm sorry. I cannot escape from this unpleasant duty. If you wish to leave Egypt there is an Italian steamer sailing from Alexandria to-morrow. Perhaps you had better go to your niece at once."

He bowed her to the lift; but Miss Jenkins would not wait for it. Tired feet and all she ran up three flights of stairs and hurried to Agatha's room. The door was open. On the bed Agatha lay sobbing. Miss Jenkins could get no sense out of her. She grew hard as iron.

"Unless you tell me what happened I can do nothing," she said.

"Even if I told you," Agatha sobbed, "you wouldn't understand."

And through a torrent of tears Miss Jenkins listened to the story of Achmet's sick brother, of his delicacy in money matters, his exalted origin and his pardonable pride. It all sounded very confused, because the central fact of Achmet's passionate aspirations was suppressed.

"Then it's true," she said at last, "that you actually invited him to come here?"

"Of course it's true," Agatha sobbed. "Do you think I'm not to be trusted?"

"What would poor Simeon think of it?"

"I don't care what Simeon thinks. I'm my own mistress. I *knew* you wouldn't understand."

"I understand one thing," said Miss Jenkins bitterly, "and that is that we're being turned out of this hotel just as if we were a couple of loose women."

"I don't care," said Agatha, "we can easily find another."

"Can we indeed? Do you think I'm going to have everyone in Cairo pointing fingers at us? Not likely. We shall sail for Naples to-morrow evening."

"You can sail anywhere you like, Aunt Martha," said Agatha, sitting bolt upright. "I'm going to stay right here in Cairo."

"What's wrong with you, Agatha? Are you mad?"

"I'm going to stay here. That's all about it. And I'm not going to be bullied by the manager or you—or anyone else."

"Well, I never thought it would come to this," said Miss Jenkins. And then, through her distress, an idea of salvation came to her. "Who's going to pay for you?" she said triumphantly. "Tell me that?"

In the same moment Agatha realised that she had parted with all her ready money to Achmet. All through their tour Miss Jenkins had acted as cashier.

"You have five hundred dollars of mine, Auntie," she said. "You'll have to give me a cheque."

Miss Jenkins laughed harshly.

"Do you take me for a fool, Agatha? I shan't give you a cent. Not one cent! You can understand that once and for all."

Four days later they reached Naples and took up their old quarters in an hotel facing the sea. All through the voyage Agatha's behaviour had been strange and sulky, and Naples, with an icy *tramontana* blowing off the Apennines and the cone of Vesuvius fluted with snow, did not improve it. So far she had made no apology for the ruin she had brought upon their plans, and Miss Jenkins, although she was inclined to kindness, could not get over the feeling that she had a right to be aggrieved.

She found it impossible to fall back into the old rhythm of Italian life; and at moments when she felt most annoyed she always remembered a jade necklace on which she had set her heart at Cairo and which now she would never possess. For all the fun she was getting out of her present life she might just as well have

stayed in Minnesota, where one didn't have to pay through the nose for steam-heating that only raised the temperature of her room to that of a faulty refrigerator. The hotel was draughty, the management rapacious, and Agatha herself was like a block of ice. Within a week it became clear that all their old comradeship was at an end. Miss Jenkins cursed the day when they had set their hearts on "doing" Egypt. She grew irritable with loneliness and nostalgia. The stone pavements of Naples burned and contorted her feet, and at times she had a craving for waffles that nearly drove her mad.

At the end of a fortnight she could stand it no longer. Sighing, she went upstairs to the room where Agatha was lying sulkily on her bed.

"Agatha," she said. "I guess I've had enough of this. I'm going right home by the next boat."

"That's not a bad idea," said Agatha lazily.

"So I'll just send a note round to the White Star and get it all fixed. There's a boat sails the day after to-morrow."

"Well, Aunt Martha, I shall be sorry to lose you," said Agatha.

Miss Jenkins gave a jump.

"What do you mean by that, Agatha?"

"Only that I'm going to stay on here."

Miss Jenkins laughed as she brought out her old argument. "And who's going to pay for you?"

"Simeon," Agatha replied, in the smoothest of voices.

"I cabled him the day we left Alexandria, and got his reply ten days ago. He's coming over on the Fabre Line. It'll be a pity if you can't stay for the wedding."

"Well," said Miss Jenkins, aghast. "Well, upon my soul! I'm glad to think, at any rate," she went on, "that you've come to your senses. But the slyness! the deceitfulness! I could never have believed it of you. Never!"

"So you won't stay?" said Agatha calmly.

"Not if you put it like that. I shall engage my berth at once. As if it wasn't enough that you should have ruined our trip in the way you did. As if . . ."

She dissolved in a haze of tears through which the beads of that lost jade necklace dangled themselves before her eyes.

"I shall certainly go the day after to-morrow," she said. "You'd better make arrangements to pay your own bill."

"Oh, Simeon will do that, of course," said Agatha mildly.

"Don't think I shan't let the poor man know how you compromised yourself in Egypt!" Miss Jenkins fumed.

"You'll have to stay on another six days in that case," said Agatha blandly. "Simeon left Boston a week ago."

"Nothing will induce me to stay another hour in your company, Agatha," said Miss Jenkins. "I tell you straight, I've finished with you."

She flung out of the bedroom and they did not meet again.

III

A week later Simeon Jackson stepped off the liner *Patria* on to the quay at Naples. He was under forty years of age, but the strain of high-speed business and the sedentary life to which it bound him had flecked his sleek hair with grey and given to his plump and rather childish face an incongruous aspect of middle-age. He had never been in Europe before; and while the shabbiness of Naples filled him with a mixture of pride and contempt, he drank it in eagerly through tortoiseshell spectacles, whose round lenses gave to his eyes an appearance of perpetual surprise and made him the natural prey of every rapacious Neapolitan cabman. Even these assaults on his purse and his person did not disturb him. This sudden expedition to Europe had been the most exciting event of his life, and he was determined to enjoy every minute of it.

It was true that the unexpectedness of the summons had rather taken his breath away. It had come as a laconic cable: *Come Naples next boat if you want to marry. Cable reply. Agatha*—which made him rub his eyes. But Simeon Jackson was a man of action, and his deep-rooted belief in the romantic waywardness of women had suggested to him that his little girl had been taught by the backwardness of Europe to realize the rock-bottom solidity of the American business man and had shown her revulsion in this delightful caprice.

So he had cabled that he was coming, received the congratulations of his partner, and sailed at once.

It struck him as strange that Agatha had not come to meet the boat; but that, he concluded, was only evidence of an adorable modesty, and when he met her in the lounge of the hotel the last of his doubts vanished. He found her exquisite as ever, and even more exquisite, perhaps, for the elegance of her Parisian clothes. Even in his most devoted dreams he had not imagined her like this. She seemed a little shy of him; but that, too, was natural enough, for Mr. Jackson was chivalrous to a degree and had a proper appreciation of feminine delicacy.

"But where is Aunt Martha?" he asked.

"She sailed the other day on the White Star boat. She's had enough of Europe: this climate never really suited her."

"And left you here all by yourself? Weren't you lonesome?"

"I'm not lonesome now," she told him shyly. "It's all for the best. You and I will have a great time together, Simeon. I'm going to take you to the Opera this evening."

"The place I want to go to is the Consulate."

"All in good time," she told him. "Now go upstairs and make yourself fit to take a lady out."

It was all strange and intoxicating. The sun had set. From the balcony of his room he could see the lights of restaurants, with white, empty tables, flashing in the

placid water. Down on the quay a hundred feet below a woman was singing a Neapolitan song to the accompaniment of a guitar. It pleased him to throw down an odd quarter that he found in his trouser pocket at her feet. He put on a pair of patent leather shoes and did a few dance-steps in front of his mirror. He sang, at the top of his voice, the Bridal Chorus from Lohengrin. It struck him, for a moment, that the chambermaid might hear him. He didn't care a damn. This was the holiday of his life. Brushed and shining he walked to the elevator. It was out of order; but that made no difference. Gaily he skipped downstairs and found Agatha waiting for him in a black satin cloak that showed off her own dazzling whiteness.

"Did you hear me singing like a kid, just now?" he asked her.

"How could I?" she said. "You're two floors above me."

Her voice, her intonation, the English that she used, seemed curiously foreign. She seemed to him an alien and exotic creature, more refined than the woman that he had adored. He admired the discretion with which she had booked his room on a different floor from hers. That was where the pure American woman scored in the eyes of all decent men.

"I guess I just worship you," he said.

And she took him out to one of those dazzling restaurants over the water, where, for the first time since prohibition, he tasted an unfaked wine. It went

to his head a little. All his surroundings, Agatha included, had gone to his head. They went on to the Opera and heard intoxicating music in a soft language that he could not understand, but which she was able to interpret. No mistake about it: even if she were changed, she was fine! All through the next two days of shopping and sight-seeing he continued to adore her. That quiet and passive tiredness, which, at first, he had grudged her as something definitely strange and European, had ended by adding to her fascination. Three days later they were married at the American Consulate.

"Now that's over," he told her, "we can settle down to a nice quiet time. *Dolce far niente*, as the Italians say. Say, honey, I like this place. I guess we can do with a couple of months of it."

She smiled gently and shook her head.

"That's what I call laziness," she said. "I'm going to show you something far better than Naples."

"Not when you're in it," he said.

"You must be a good boy," she coaxed him, "and take me where I want to go. Will you promise?"

"I'll go to Timbuctoo if it's practicable," he told her.

"I don't want to go to Timbuctoo."

"Where do you want to go then?"

"To Egypt."

"Well, that's fine," he answered. "Say, I've always had a hankering after that old Sphinx. You and me will have a shot at guessing her riddle between us."

IV

When the manager saw Mr. and Mrs. Simeon K. Jackson enter the hotel he blinked with astonishment; but before he could decide how to deal with her, Agatha was on him.

"Mr. Schwarz," she cooed, with the sweet assurance of a welcome. "May I introduce my husband? Now that has come as a surprise to you? No wonder! We were married in Naples only the other day, so I shall expect you to give us the very choicest room in the hotel. Is that all right?"

The manager blinked again; but he gave them their room. Now that the heat of the delta was beginning to stoke up, and the flood of the Nile and of tourist-traffic simultaneously subsiding, one need not be so severe. The quiet brazenness of Agatha intrigued him; he wondered if Simeon really *was* her husband. He liked the look of Simeon and was sorry for him.

That night the moon was full, and Agatha, who, ever since they landed in Port Said, had seemed to be possessed by a curious excitement, a lightness of spirit, which invested her, in Simeon's eyes, with new enchantments, insisted that they should drive out to see the pyramids after dinner. He was sleepy already with the strong desert air; but she seemed so childish and ethereal, her fair beauty shone with a brightness so provocative through the black lace dress which she had

chosen that he could refuse her nothing. She had ordered an automobile to wait for them outside the hotel. As she descended the steps, slim beyond words in a cloak of moonlight-coloured satin, he watched her and could scarcely believe that this elusive and brilliant creature was actually his wife.

"It's all like a dream," he told her. "I can't believe I've got you."

She laughed softly.

By the side of the waiting car stood a tall figure in a green silk *burnous*, whose eyes flashed as he opened the door for them.

"And who's the Arab chieftain?" Simeon asked.

"That is Achmet," she whispered. "He's our dragoon. Quite an old friend."

"Is he going to condescend to come with us?"

"Yes, but you needn't worry; he'll sit with the driver."

He thought he knew what she meant. They leaned back in the car very close together and were whirled away over the bridge of Kasr-el-Nil into the warm night. Strange dun-coloured shapes of camels and country carts laden with lucerne flashed for a moment into the glare of their headlights and were gone.

"This is what I call Romance," said Simeon. "Like a dream, as I said before. Say, little girl, mind you never wake me!"

He leaned over and kissed her. Her face was smooth and cold.

"I hope the Arab chieftain doesn't understand English," he whispered.

Like three grey clouds the pyramids brooded on the desert. He and Agatha stood there ankle-deep in sand and watched them. Dogs in the native village that lies under the brow of the hill were barking at the moon, and the flank of the first pyramid threw back a magnified echo as though a pack of hounds were imprisoned within its bulk. Simeon was full of a noisy enthusiasm; but Agatha was silent as stone.

"I think I'd better have a closer look at that old Sphinx before we turn back," he said. "Will you come along?"

"I don't think so," she answered. "My shoes are full of sand."

He hesitated. "Well, I don't like to leave you here," he said. "Sure you won't be lonesome?"

"Achmet can stay with me."

"Certain you're not frightened of him?"

She laughed. "Frightened? Not in the least. You go along and I'll wait for you."

He left them, trudging down the sandy slope. Once only he turned and waved. Evidently Agatha did not see him, for she and Achmet were standing together like two stone figures in the moonlight.

Twenty minutes later he returned. The two figures were standing there just as he had left them. Simeon, awed and bewildered, took her arm, and they walked back to the car in silence.

When he awoke next morning Agatha was up and dressed.

"I'll order your breakfast," she said, "and go downstairs at once to fix up what we'll do to-day with Achmet."

"That's a fine idea," he said lazily. "Just throw me the Baedeker; I want to get into the facts about this old Cheops. Say, aren't you going to give your husband a morning kiss?"

She kissed him, seriously, and left him. Within ten minutes the Arab brought him his breakfast and he ate it, lounging in bed with the open Baedeker on the counterpane. Then he got up and dressed at leisure. The luxurious indolence of the holiday was upon him, and behind it all, the memory of Agatha's beauty which he could now call his own. When he had dressed he sat at the window waiting for her to return. Half an hour passed and still she did not come. Probably there was some misunderstanding. Perhaps in his drowsiness he had not understood that she would wait for him in the lounge. As he emerged from the lift a bull-necked Berberine in a red sash put a note into his hands. It was addressed to him, and the writing was Agatha's. He wondered, as he opened it, what new caprice this might be. Married life was full of surprises. But such a surprise as this . . . !

"*Forgive me,*" he read. "*I have acted like a beast, but I can't help it. It is no good looking for me. I have gone with the only man I love into the desert's*

illimitable freedom. Forgive and forget."

He plumped himself down in a wicker chair and sat staring at the incredible words. Then he called for cognac. He sat there for an hour, for two hours, until the lounge began to fill with oily Levantines who had come there for lunch. All the time he was hoping that the letter was some ghastly kind of joke. But it wasn't a joke. He stepped blindly out of the hotel into a crowd of pestering dragomans. He walked the streets of Cairo until it was dark, hoping, all the time, that he might catch sight of the fugitive. At sunset he returned to the hotel and shut himself up in his room among the delicate fineries of Agatha's trousseau.

A dozen projects came to his mind and were rejected, for he was still full of obstinate hopes. The natural thing would have been to take the hotel manager into his confidence; but the humiliation of such a proceeding was too terrible to face. Night fell and passed in an agony of wakeful frustration. And when day came, a day of bright and torturing brilliance, he knew that he must act. He had always believed himself to be a strong man.

He went down and accosted the manager. He could not speak. He just handed him the letter, and stood with ridiculous tears in his eyes. The manager read it and nodded sympathetically, just as if this monstrous thing were in the ordinary way of business.

"I think I can help you," he said. "You'd better come along with me in an *arabieh* to the police."

"The police?" Simeon gasped. "There may have been some mistake . . . some accident . . ."

The manager shook his head.

"We had better go at once," he said. "You ought to have gone last night."

"Well, sir, you understand, it was a delicate position."

"Yes, I understand."

V

Now the functions of a British police officer in Egypt entail a profound study of the humanities, an acute sense of humour, and an unusual degree of tact. All these were possessed by Bimbashi Brown, the official who listened to Simeon Jackson's story at the Cairo Central Police Station. He wore a well-cut red *tarbush* which added a singular dignity to his grey moustache and to a pair of keen blue eyes. He read the note which Simeon presented to him without a flicker of surprise.

"The lady is your wife," he said. "How long has she been missing?"

"Since yesterday morning," Simeon confessed.

"You should have come here at once. But that is beside the point. I quite understand your feelings. You have no idea where she has gone?"

"Absolutely none."

"And you, Mr. Schwarz?"

"I'm afraid, sir, I shall have to add to this gentle-

man's distress. The lady was here a month ago with her aunt. We had occasion to comment on her imprudent relations with a certain dragoman."

"Sir!" Simeon rose to his feet. "I didn't come here to hear my wife insulted."

"Of course you didn't, Mr. Jackson," said the police officer calmly. "But you *did* come here to trace her, and Mr. Schwarz is ready to help us. This is all confidential. There are no newspaper reporters about. I know it's very unpleasant for you; but then, the whole matter is unpleasant, isn't it? Yes, Mr. Schwarz? What was the dragoman's name?"

"Achmet. I have the number of his licence."

The police officer touched a bell. An orderly appeared.

"Harvey, please bring me the dossier of a dragoman named Achmet. Number . . . number three hundred and fifty-eight."

They waited in a silence in which Simeon wished a hundred times that he might die without further trouble. The orderly returned with a file.

"Achmet . . ." said the officer dreamily. "Yes, it seems that Mr. Achmet is an old acquaintance of ours. That simplifies matters. Now let us have another look at the note. *The desert's illimitable freedom*. Exactly. One seems to have heard those words before."

"It might mean anything," said Simeon pathetically.

"It might, Mr. Jackson, but I don't think it does."
He rang his bell again.

"Send Sergeant Norris here at once."

The sergeant came.

"Very good, Norris," said the officer. "I want you to take a patrol out to the pyramids at once . . . and a pair of good field-glasses. Then you'd better leave the patrol below and climb up with the glasses to a point from which you can command all the desert on the edge of Mena village. Somewhere, not very far away from it, you'll probably see a tent; and if you watch the tent closely you'll probably see a dragoman named Achmet, number three hundred and fifty-eight, and a European woman somewhere near it."

The sergeant's eyes brightened.

"I know the gentleman, sir."

"So much the better. When you've made certain that he's there you will surround the tent. The patrol can take care of the white woman and bring her back here in a closed *arabieh* while you deal with Achmet. All that Achmet wants is a thrashing, and he'd better have it in view of the lady. Don't let him off mildly."

"Very good, sir, I won't."

He looked as if he meant it.

"And now, Mr. Jackson, I suggest a whisky and soda," said the officer. "This business will take an hour or two."

Mr. Schwarz rose and took his leave.

"*The desert's illimitable freedom*," the officer murmured, as he poured out Simeon's whisky. "It's not altogether her fault, Mr. Jackson. It's these damned

novelists. Every novel written about the desert should be censored by the police. You'll find a comfortable chair in the next room. If you'll forgive me . . . I'm rather busy this morning."

He opened the door and Simeon Jackson passed through. In all the history of his profession it is doubtful if any real-estate agent ever endured a torture comparable to that through which he passed in the next two hours. The perfidy of Agatha haunted him and, even more than her perfidy, the memory of her beauty; for while the one hardened him to an inexorable hatred the other overwhelmed him with mingled pity and desire. Never, through all his sufferings, could he dismiss from his mind the vision of Agatha as he had seen her standing under the loom of that great pyramid in moonlight; and when he thought of her thus he found himself blinded with tears.

"Perhaps they won't find her," he thought. "In which case there will be nothing to decide."

"But I want her, I want her," he cried. "Agatha . . . my little Agatha!"

"There is something devilish about this damned country," he thought. "The poor child's not responsible. Glamour . . . that's the word."

"But a man can't take a thing like that lying down. It's inhuman. If I were a Dago I'd shoot her on sight. And the law courts would certainly acquit me."

"To run off with a white man's one thing. But a nigger. . . ."

(Agatha had never explained to him in her letters that Arabs are of Aryan descent.)

In the end, exhausted by this agony of thought, he sat still like a drunken man, his head between his hands; and so, three hours later, the police officer found him.

"It's all right," he said quietly. "Our friend Achmet won't leave the desert's illimitable freedom for a week or two. Your wife's in my office."

Simeon stared at him in silence through his tortoiseshell spectacles.

"If you like," the officer told him, "I'll ring up the American Consulate and ask them to deal with her. I don't want to worry you, but sooner or later you'll have to make up your mind. I don't think you'll have any further trouble," he continued. "My instructions were carried out in her presence. You will be quite alone here. I'm just going out to get a cup of tea. Back in half an hour's time.

He walked out into the passage, closing the door softly behind him.

In the silence that followed Simeon Jackson heard a stifled sob. It came from his own dry throat. He shuddered, then crumpled his hat in his hand, and walked, like a hero, into the next room.

The Perfect Day

MR. G. G. SULLIVAN was down on his luck. Not that there was anything unusual in that. Indeed, as Mrs. Sullivan frequently and quite unnecessarily told him, he had been born unlucky—the day of his birth had been only one degree less unlucky than that of their marriage. That very morning she had been heard persistently and loudly asking herself, the Almighty, and such of the neighbours as could spare her the time and the sympathy, why she had ever married him.

That question was quite unnecessary, too. She knew quite well, without any direction from heaven, why she had married Gilbert. She had married him, first of all, because they were both Irish; because they were male and female of the same species—herself a lady's maid and he a butler. She had married him, again, because he had “a way with him”; because he was—in those days—a fine figure of a man, well-covered, spruce, so like a gentleman that nervous guests had been known to bow to him at a party. She had married him also because it was just about time to get married; she was lonely; a former mistress had left her a house, and Mr. Sullivan, as he told her, had two thousand pounds

in the bank and thought of retiring from service.

Which was true, more or less. Rather less . . . For the sum of his savings, at the time when he proposed to her, was nearer seven hundred, and his retirement had been abrupt and involuntary, being a sequel to his having been found sleeping like a child in the wine-cellar on Derby Day, with two empty bottles, which had once contained vintage port, in the pockets of his coat-tails. It was part of his bad luck that on this occasion—which was only the second of the kind—his master had backed the same horse as Mr. Sullivan and somewhat more heavily. His mood was unsympathetic, and he showed his annoyance by giving Mr. Sullivan notice in the cellar, there and then.

When the gentry forget themselves and behave in this vulgar, perfunctory manner, the least that superior servants can do is to show their spirit. "If Mr. Sullivan goes, my lady," Sarah told her mistress, "I shall go, too." And her ladyship clutched at the opportunity; she disliked having her hair dressed in an aura of Guinness's stout and lavender-water. The maid and the butler retired, in good order, on the same day; invoked the blessing of the church on their union, and set up a lodging-house.

The house which Sarah Sullivan's defunct mistress had left her and its new proprietors were equally well-adapted for the letting of lodgings. Sarah was an excellent cook, and Mr. Sullivan a king among menservants. He knew, as he always said, a "gent" when he saw one;

he knew "his place" and, as long as it suited him, kept to it. It was, he implied, a privilege to be waited on by him. Standing with his napkin on his arm he would modestly tell how he had "served" King Edward VII, Lord Lonsdale, Theodore Roosevelt and Mr. Lloyd George. On one occasion he had shaken hands with his idol, Horatio Bottomley. He was, in short, a sportsman and a man of the world; and if little mistakes occurred in the bill no real gentleman could complain.

For a time the Sullivans' lodging-house went swimmingly. It came to wreck, in the end, on the treacherous reef of the proprietor's System. This System, to which Sarah constantly and bitterly referred, had no connection whatever with her husband's health, which was as good as could be expected from a systematic drinker—indeed, Sarah, in moments of relaxation, liked a drop herself. It was connected with Mr. Sullivan's passion for backing horses, and consisted in backing the second favourite for every race on the card. Like all other Systems it was infallible. All that was necessary to make it a complete success was unlimited capital. Unfortunately for Sarah their capital was not unlimited, and never would be until the System proved itself successful. Mr. Sullivan, however, nailed his System to the mast; and the lodging-house went under, in less than a year, with colours flying.

When the house was sold to pay off the mortgage, the Sullivan family went into lodgings themselves—into lodgings, alas, far less elegant than those which

they had kept. The System was now kept going by a series of temporary billets, so transient that Mr. Sullivan had not even time to lose them. When the season was over he got a permanent part-time job as carver in the employees' dining-room of a big store, where he was able to explain to the shop assistants all about King Edward VII, Lord Lonsdale, Mr. Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt, and elucidate the one infallible System by which a man with unlimited capital could make money on the turf. He was even prepared to undertake commissions and arrange bets for them with Mr. Harris, the barber, who conducted a private book-maker's business just round the corner. All went well until the proprietor of the store, who was not a gentleman, came to hear of Mr. Sullivan's sporting activities. There was a difference of opinion on the subject of the Rights of Man. Mr. Sullivan left, with dignity.

What Sarah objected to far more than his leaving was the fact that it kept him hanging about the house. He sat there all day, in the hours when the pubs were not open, with a *Sporting Almanack*, a series of racing papers, and a sheaf of dirty betting slips on which he scribbled the names of horses.

"You and your horses!" she would cry. "I wish old Noah had left horses out of the ark. I wish horses had never been born, nor you either! If you'd try spotting jobs instead of your blooming winners!"

Mr. Sullivan knew better than to protest. Sarah had the whip hand, and he knew it. It was idle for him to

explain that, given unlimited capital, a level stake of five shillings each way laid according to his System would have shown a profit of twenty pounds on the last month's racing.

"Twenty pounds be blowed! You go out and get twenty shillings," was all she said.

Occasionally, in these days, Mr. Sullivan would get odd jobs as a waiter, borrowing enough money from the friendly barber to redeem his dress-suit, which, along with the bulk of their wardrobe and movable property, had by now found its way to the pawnshop down the street. It was no use asking Sarah for money nowadays. She kept an adamant hand on the remains of her savings. She wouldn't even give him the price of a tankard of beer. . . .

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That morning, it seemed, his fortunes had reached rock-bottom; he hadn't found a job for a fortnight; there wasn't in his pocket as much as a penny to buy a Racing Special, much less a drink. Sarah had sat on his spectacles, so that he couldn't read the *Sporting Almanack*. It was raining, steadily, relentlessly, and he had pawned his overcoat. To accentuate the irony of Fate, this was the day of the Epsom Spring Handicap, for which, all Systems apart, he knew of a certainty—a rank outsider called Ruddigore. He was so sure of this that he would—literally—have put his shirt on it; but, apart from the one he was wearing, all his shirts

were in pawn. And now, to crown all, Sarah had got out of bed on the wrong side, and improved the occasion by telling him in detail all his delinquencies during the last five years. Not even the memory of King Edward VII, Lord Lonsdale, Mr. Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt—not even the recollection of Mr. Bottomley's podgy handclasp could restore the sense of personal dignity which Sarah's tongue stripped from him.

There was only one way of asserting it; to leave her scolding.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "I'm going out."

"Are you indeed?" she said scornfully. "It's raining cats and dogs. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Well, cats and dogs is better than staying here listening to your jabber," he said. "I might as well be drunk as the way I am."

"You might as well be dead and drowned for all I care," said Sarah savagely.

"There's many a true word spoken in jest," he darkly reminded her. But the threat had been used too often. She only answered it with a cackle of laughter.

Mr. Sullivan went out. It was not only wet but hellishly cold. He turned up his collar and slouched off over the shining cobbles, the water squelching in his boots. At the barber's, he reflected, he might get the loan of a Racing Special. No—damn her!—she'd broken his glasses and he couldn't read it. Perhaps the

barber, an old friend, would lend him a bob, as he had done once before, to put on Ruddigore. Small chance of that!

Ruddigore . . . Ruddigore . . . How the name of that horse would stick in his memory! There was something significant in its very persistence! Battling his way through the rain he found himself face to face with an advertisement-hoarding from which a big poster, red-lettered, threw its announcement at his eyes. The lettering was so bold that even he, short-sighted as he was, could read the biggest characters. Through the mist of rain they almost shouted at him: RUDDIGORE, he read; then, beneath: GILBERT . . . SULLIVAN.

His own name, in print, beneath the name of the horse that was bound to win!

He stood and stared at it incredulously. Down his spine ran a trickle of rain. He was dreaming, he thought, unless he were going mad! But there it was, be he mad or sane: RUDDIGORE . . . GILBERT SULLIVAN.

Mr. Sullivan was not acquainted with the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Moreover, being an Irishman, he was superstitious. All sportsmen, even if they are not Irish, are superstitious. There, on the poster of that operatic touring-company, he saw, in red and white, a mystical and complete confirmation of his racing instinct. Ruddigore was going to win. Ruddigore was destined by Fate to carry her partner Gilbert Sullivan

to fortune. In spite of the dripping rain his mind took fire.

"Talk about borrowing a bob from the barber!" he told himself. "Why, it's like going in the face of Providence not to have a quid on! It's throwing away the chance of a blooming lifetime. A man who wouldn't pawn his pants to back a thing like that is no sportsman!"

Yet what could he do? The only place to which he could turn was their bare lodgings, from which every convertible stick and rag had already been stripped, in the sinister possession of that virago, Sarah. "I'd pawn the damn bed," he thought, "if I could get it out of the house without her seeing." But Sarah, as he knew well enough, lacked the sporting instinct; Sarah had reached a stage at which she took no chances.

And then, of a sudden, he remembered Sarah's umbrella. . . .

Mr. Sullivan's eyes brightened craftily. That umbrella, the most cherished of all her sentimental possessions, had been left to her in the will of the old lady who had bequeathed her the house in which they had kept lodgings. Mr. Sullivan had often cast a covetous glance at it, yet always shuddered at the risk of touching it. It was, in fact, the apple of Sarah's eye—a hideously ornate affair, with a handle of richly-carved ivory. It had been given to Sarah's late mistress by her brother, an Indian official; hence the form of the handle which was shaped like an elephant whose arched trunk

provided a curved hand-grip. Sarah kept it, as Mr. Sullivan knew, wrapped up in a piece of tissue paper under the bed. The problem which faced him was how to enter the bedroom at this unusual hour without arousing Sarah's suspicions.

Mr. Sullivan had not been a butler in high-class service for nothing. His life had been one long education in social tact. He was a master of innocent-seeming subterfuge; but in Sarah, as he knew well, he had found his match. Ever since that bank-balance of his had shrunk in a night—their wedding-night—from two thousand to seven hundred, she had made it her custom to disbelieve him as a matter of principle. No excuse that could not be substantiated would hold water with her. It was not until he reached the doorstep that inspiration came to him. He paused there, carefully extracted his back collar-stud from the shirt, slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket, and entered the house. The storm within had not yet subsided; the appearance of Mr. Sullivan lashed it into fury.

"So you've turned up again like a bad penny!" she said. "Soaked to the bone, I suppose! And now you'll be wanting me to dry your clothes."

"Have you seen my back stud anywhere?" said Mr. Sullivan, disregarding her outburst.

"No, I haven't," she said. "And what's more, I'm not going to look for it."

"It must have rolled under the bed," said Mr. Sullivan craftily.

"And I suppose you expect me to go ferreting after it on my hands and knees?" she scoffed. "If so you're mistaken. Go and do your own dirty work!"

With an air of aggrieved dignity, but secretly triumphant, Mr. Sullivan entered the bedroom, whence a sound of puffings, blowing and imprecations satisfied Sarah. Beneath the bed his hand soon recognized the ivory umbrella-handle. He extracted it by the trunk and slipped it carefully down his right trouser-leg. Then, ostentatiously displaying the collar-stud, he re-entered the living-room with the dignified gait enforced by the concealed umbrella.

"Found it," he said. "Under the bed, like I said it would be."

Sarah looked up scornfully. "Oh, you're a clever one, aren't you?" Then her sharp eyes noticed that he was walking stiffly. "What's wrong with your leg?" she asked.

"It's the rheumatism," said Mr. Sullivan hurriedly.

"The rheumatism! Why don't you call it the beer and have done with it?"

With the air of not deigning to answer this insult he escaped, moving his stiff leg crabwise down the stairs. His heart was tremulous with triumph, not only at the craftiness of his stratagem, but also because he had got the better of Sarah. Once in the street, he removed the umbrella from his trouser-leg and carried it concealed beneath his coat to the pawnbroker's.

The pawnbroker's wife shook hands with him like an old friend.

"Good morning, Mr. Sullivan," she said. "Why, you're quite a stranger!"

He unfolded the umbrella proudly. "What d'you think of that? Isn't that a lovely bit of work? Pure ivory, mind you! That handle's worth ten pounds if it's worth a penny. I want a quid on it."

"Oh, don't be funny now!" said the pawnbroker's wife. But Mr. Sullivan, skilled in the facial expressions of her trade, could see how the elephant fascinated her eyes. They brightened covetously as she said: "What about ten bob?"

"Make it fifteen. We'll split the difference."

"Well, just to oblige a friend," she said, as she made out the ticket.

With the money burning in his pocket Mr. Sullivan ran to the barber's.

"Just dropped in to pay you that money I owe you," he said with the dignity which he could still, on occasion, command. He sat down in the chair. "You might give me a shave," he said. It was many months since he had indulged in such a luxury. When his chin was well-lathered he dropped out a casual question:

"What about Ruddigore for the two o'clock, Mr. Harris?" he said, with a wink.

"Ruddigore? Not a chance in the wide!" sniffed the barber contemptuously. "The *Pinafore* blood won't stay six furlongs. Not a ghost!"

"What price can you get?" Mr. Sullivan asked, even more casually.

The barber consulted his paper. "She's quoted at fifty. I'll give you forty to one."

"I'll take it," said Mr. Sullivan. "Twenty pounds to ten shillings."

"Look here, do you *know* something?" the barber asked suspiciously.

"I know nothing at all," Mr. Sullivan answered, truthfully. "But when I have a fancy, I back it. I'm that sort of man."

"Well, fancy costs money, let me tell you," the barber laughed, as he pocketed the ten shillings and gave Mr. Sullivan a folded slip in return.

With the balance of his fifteen shillings Mr. Sullivan retired to his favourite pub. Once more after many months of petty speculation he was recapturing the thrill of a considerable gamble. His clean-shaven face was flushed; he was confident, exhilarated. Twenty pounds—three months' earnings! The excitement was so great that he even forgot about Sarah. He bought a cigar—very different from the Havanas that he used to purloin when he was in service, but the flavour contributed to his ebullient sense of prosperity. The good old times had come back. Ruddigore. . . ! He drank three pints of beer on end and on an empty stomach as he waited for the first Racing Special to confirm his good fortune.

It came, and once more he cursed Sarah for having

broken his glasses. The barman, a sportsman like himself, read the stop-press column out loud:

"Two o'clock. Epsom Spring Handicap. First—Ruddigore. . . ."

"What price, Walter?" Mr. Sullivan demanded tremulously.

"Fifty to one," read the barman.

"Fifty to one! Well, I didn't do bad getting forty."

"You mean to say you backed Ruddigore? What did you have on?"

"Ten shillings." Magnificently Mr. Sullivan showed him the betting-slip.

"Ten shillings? Why, that means twenty pounds! Well, you are a lucky one!"

Mr. Sullivan was thinking. On Wednesdays the barber's shop closed at two, and was opened again in the evening for the sale of tobacco. He couldn't collect his winnings till evening came. He confided this difficulty to the barman. "I happen to be a bit short at the moment. You might lend me a couple of quid till he opens the shop," he suggested casually.

"Well, I guess I can manage that all right," said the barman cheerfully.

Mr. Sullivan stood him a drink to celebrate the occasion.

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Even the face of Nature had brightened in honour of Ruddigore's victory. The miserable rain of the

morning had blown away; a spring sun shone; a brisk wind dried the pavements. The warm air of the pub had taken the damp out of Mr. Sullivan's clothes and his leaky boots. The beer had performed the same service for his spirits. It was a happy man at peace with the world, a spruce, erect and jocular sportsman, who gaily swung up the stairs and entered the kitchen. Sarah gaped at him. A look of horror and distrust came into her eyes.

"Gilbert, you've been drinking," she said.

"Been drinking?" he cried. "That's a good one! I've been drinking, have I? Come on, Sarah, get out your best clothes! We're going off on a spree."

"Going off on a spree, are you? I know better than that. You're going to bed to sleep it off, or your name's not Sullivan. Come on, now. No nonsense, Gilbert!"

In answer to this challenge Mr. Sullivan caught her up in his arms and gave her a smacking kiss.

"I knew it . . . Beer!" she said.

"Three pints of the best," Mr. Sullivan answered gloriously. "Now put on your hat. You and me are off on a beano!" He picked her up by the waist and swung her off her feet, which was no small achievement, for Sarah, in spite of hard times, had been putting on flesh. She stared at him, flustered and breathless.

"Sullivan," she said. "If you're not drunk, you've gone potty. What's the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of this," said Mr. Sullivan, "is

Ruddigore." He laughed in her blank face. "It's a ruddy coup, Sarah," he said—he pronounced it "coop"—"it's a ruddy bonanza! Forty to one . . . twenty pounds! Now buck up, put your hat on. We're going for a drive, you and me! Be a sportsman!"

Gradually his wild good humour got the better of her. It was cheering, after so many months of drabness, to find him himself again, to see him as the old, gay, confident, generous Sullivan whom she had married so rashly and trustfully five years before. It was, as he infectiously suggested, just like old times, dropping back through the wintry years into those spring-like days when she had been proud to be seen in public walking arm-in-arm with him. She surrendered to the sentimental idea of recapturing this lost atmosphere of joking prosperity, of dragging herself up from her despondency to his exhilarating level. He was always, at heart, a playboy; why not play with him? Of course it wouldn't last—nothing ever lasted with Sullivan—yet why not pretend, for an hour or two, that life was worth living? Why not join the mercurial creature in his flight of illusion?

To an accompaniment of light-hearted badinage she put on her Sunday clothes. Mr. Sullivan was amorously inclined, punctuating the process with embraces that she coyly avoided. He hadn't behaved like this since the days of their honeymoon. And always, between his jokes, he was hurrying her up. By the time she was dressed, she was just as excited as he was. With his

arm around her waist he bundled her out of the bedroom.

"Come on, slowcoach!" he said. "Stir a leg, or we'll miss all the fun!"

At the top of the stairs she hesitated.

"I've forgotten my umbrella!"

"Umbrella be damned!" said Mr. Sullivan hurriedly. "The sun is shining."

"I could use it as a sunshade," said Sarah reluctantly.

"Oh, drop that! Come on!"

She wondered why, at the foot of the stairs, Mr. Sullivan suddenly stopped and rocked with laughter.

"What's the matter, silly?" she said.

But he only went on laughing; and Sarah, for no particular reason, felt bound to laugh with him.

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It was, as he had said before, just like old times. What a figure of a man, in spite of his clothes, Mr. Sullivan was! Anybody with half an eye in their heads could see he was somebody. The way in which he hailed a cab and showed her into it with the lavish courtesy which once he had bestowed on duchesses! The sun shone brilliantly through the rain-washed air. The cabman touched his hat as Mr. Sullivan gave him his lordly directions. They drove through a park where birds were singing blithely and smart nursemaids wheeled pink-and-white babies that blinked at the sun. It was a pity, Sarah thought, that she and Sullivan had

never had a baby, though what sort of a dragging-up the poor brat would have had in their present lodgings wouldn't bear thinking of. Still, this was a day for wistful, bright imaginings. The squalid Sarah of that wet morning was deliberately forgotten. She was Mrs. George Gilbert Sullivan, accustomed to the society of elegant ladies, driving out in a Victoria on the right-hand of the handsomest man—she had always declared it—the handsomest, most distinguished-looking man she had ever met. Faults he might have—who hadn't?—but there it was! Nobody could sit up and walk with such dignity as he did! There flashed across Sarah's mind a vision of Mr. Sullivan as she had seen him crossing the kitchen that morning. He had walked with a stiff leg, and she had scoffed at him, brutally.

"How's the rheumatism, love?" she enquired. "Is your knee all right, now?"

And once more Mr. Sullivan, inexplicably, burst out laughing.

With a fond, instinctive gesture, Sarah slipped her cotton-gloved hand into his. "That's better," she sighed.

By Mr. Sullivan's directions the cab was taking them to a public-house on the edge of the country much frequented by bean-feasters and kept by another retired butler, an acquaintance of his palmy days. A jovial, prosperous fellow, he received the Sullivans boisterously. Mr. Sullivan insisted on standing him whisky on the strength of his "coup." Mrs. Sullivan and

the innkeeper's wife, being ladies, drank port wine. They passed an extremely refined and enjoyable afternoon together, talking about the landlord's late master, the Marquis of Clun. And Mr. Sullivan, who was now at the top of his form, gave them a series of screamingly funny imitations of King Edward VII, Lord Lonsdale, Mr. Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt that made the ladies laugh till they cried. Then the landlord, who was a poultry-fancier, took them out to the back to show them his fowls. Rhode Island Reds, they were; and Mr. Sullivan was bound to confess that he had never seen a finer lot of birds. "And I'm no chicken," he added, among peals of laughter.

"I'm going to take your husband round the corner to see a friend," the landlord told Mrs. Sullivan with a wink. The men went off arm-in-arm and the landlord's wife, a very superior person, asked Sarah, very politely, if she would like to see the river which ran just at the bottom of the garden. It was just like a dream, Sarah thought; the water all shining blue with white swans swimming on it, and a skiff shooting by with a young lady and gentleman in it. The sun was so strong that the lady had put up her parasol, and there came into Sarah's mind a shadow of regret that Mr. Sullivan had hurried her away without her umbrella. She doubted if the landlord's wife had ever seen an ivory handle like that. It was no good describing it; folk might think you were showing off; it sounded just soft to say it was shaped like an elephant.

By the time they returned the gentlemen were having another drink.

"Just a wee sip of port," the landlord's wife pressed her. Sarah didn't mind if she did. Mr. Sullivan was ordering tea. Half a pound of fried sausages and mashed potato! My, weren't they just famished! Their host and hostess watched them and talked with them while they ate. Why, if we'd been royalty, Mr. Sullivan said, they couldn't be more attentive. And he knew, if anyone did! Such jokes, such thigh-slapping! They sent out a pint of beer to the cabman to keep him warm. It was just like Sullivan to think of it.

At half-past six, when the sun had set, they decided it was time to think of going home. Sarah, indeed, would have been glad to stay longer; but Mr. Sullivan, in spite of what he had drunk, was keeping an eye on the time. He remembered that the barber's shop would not be open after eight and meant to make no mistake about collecting his money. They bade an affectionate farewell to the innkeepers. It was a privilege, Sarah said, to meet such high-class people. The women kissed impulsively; the men shook hands again and again. As a last inspiration Mr. Sullivan ran back and fetched two bottles of stout to cheer their way home. They opened them at once to save trouble.

On the homeward journey George Gilbert was more dignified than ever. His stately if somewhat somnolent calm contrasted strongly with Sarah's ardent flutterings. They were coming, as the song said, to the end of a per-

fect day. Its memory filled her with warm, soft emotions. She threw the empty stout-bottle into the hedge. She would like, she thought, to hold her Gilbert's hand; to feel, in the dusk, like those two young people on the river. She wanted to make amends for the bad temper she had shown only that morning by little displays of tenderness.

Mr. Sullivan, on the other hand, wanted to go to sleep. On this day of all days nobody could say he hadn't earned it; so she left him alone.

As the lights of the town sprang up around them Mr. Sullivan awoke. He tapped the cab-driver imperiously on the back.

"Just pull up at the barber's shop at the corner of Foss Street," he said.

"Very good, sir." All the footmen, she remembered, used to call Mr. Sullivan "Sir." The cab drew up alongside the pavement. Mr. Sullivan descended. No sooner had he left her than Sarah realized that something was wrong. Not only was the little shop shut; the shutters were up. He peered through the cracks in them to see if there was a light inside. Not a glimmer! He beat on the door; but nobody answered. It was locked and padlocked outside.

The sight of the padlock made Mr. Sullivan go red in the neck. It was disquieting. In a flurry of alarm he knocked up the next-door neighbour. A surly man came to the door in his shirt-sleeves. "Who's that? What is it?" he growled.

"Mr. Harris, the barber," said George Gilbert, politely. "I see the shop's shut. I suppose you don't happen to know where he's gone, or when he's likely to be back?"

"Yes, I do," said the neighbour. "I know both. He's gone to London, where he came from. He's left in a hurry, and he's not coming back any more. He's sold the business. As a matter of fact, my son's bought it. Ten pounds he's paid for the stock and the goodwill. Starts business to-morrow. Want anything else?"

Mr. Sullivan didn't. He had got a lot more than he'd bargained for. He'd been welshed! Twenty pounds . . . and the best part of two of them spent already—to say nothing of the ten shillings of his stake! He doubted if he had enough of the barman's loan left to pay the cabman. He only hoped that Sarah had not yet realized the full meaning of what had happened. With a superb composure, the legacy of years of service in the very best families, he returned to his seat at Sarah's side. Again he tapped the cabman on the back.

"Home, driver!" he said. . . .

At that moment the two storms burst: the first from a thundercloud which had covered the sky at nightfall and, suddenly descending, drenched them to the skin as they sat; the second, in a torrent no less vigorous, from Sarah's outraged lips. Mr. Sullivan helplessly bowed his head to both of them; for each, in its way, was entirely irresistible. When, like drowned rats, they

escaped from the lashings of heaven and crawled dejectedly up the narrow stairs, the lash of Sarah's tongue still whirled round his head. *Why* hadn't he collected the money before they went out? *Why* hadn't he told her the barber's shop was shut? *Why* hadn't he called at the police-station? *Why* hadn't he had the sense to ask the shirt-sleeved neighbour for the barber's address?

"Oh, go out in the rain and get it yourself if you want it!" he shouted angrily.

"That's right, let all the neighbours hear you swearing at me!" she provoked him. "As a matter of fact, since you've gone so stupid, that's just what I'm going to do. You wait a moment!"

She jammed on her hat again and rushed into the bedroom precipitately. When Mr. Sullivan heard her flop down on her knees and go scratching under the bed he knew that the worst was to come. "Well, if it comes, it comes!" he thought, recklessly. "In for a penny, in for a pound!" For twenty pounds, to be exact . . .

Like a black squall she burst into the room again.

"My umbrella!" she gasped. "It's gone! Where's my umbrella? What have you done with it?" The melting creature of an hour ago had become a tigress. "You've taken it . . . don't tell me a lie! . . . you've took my umbrella!" And she burst into tears.

"Oh, drop that!" said Mr. Sullivan, brutally. He didn't mean to be brutal. But the thought of her blessed umbrella compared with his twenty pounds! He took

her by the shoulders and shook her till she stopped crying. Then his heart softened.

"Look here, Sarah," he said persuasively, "have we had a perfect day or haven't we? Have we had a rare spree and a first-class blow-out, or have we *not*? If you've any sense left in your head you'll count your blessings, cut your losses like I do, be game! Don't spoil my lucky day!"

"Lucky?" she wailed indignantly. "Where's my umbrella?"

The woman was beyond all reason! Unsporting! Ungrateful!

"Well, if you want it, you can damn well get it," said Mr. Sullivan indignantly. "Here you are! I'm ready for bed."

And he left her, superbly, gaping at a rain-soaked pawn-ticket.

The Pearl and the Oyster

IN this case of Leonard Portal so many fantastic rumours have been circulated and so many malicious accusations made that I feel it nothing less than a duty to my wife and self to write down the plain truth of the matter as it occurred. I cannot illuminate it with the flashes of genius which Portal himself has given to his lies; I cannot embroider it with fancies, like his literary friends. I am neither a poet nor a novelist, but a plain, middle-aged business man, with some artistic sensibilities, who has been fool enough, in his weaker moments, to give help, moral and financial, to members of this ungrateful and dastardly crew.

I first met Portal shortly before the war, at a time when my means were considerably less than they are now. I knew his work already; for his publisher, Baptist, who is a member of my club, and therefore, as far as I know, entirely respectable, had advised me to make a point of acquiring his first editions. I bought and read his first novel and his early volume of poems. Both, I am bound to admit, seemed to me to be works of genius, but so curious and unpleasant, if I may use the word, that I took the precaution of keeping them, along with works of a similar nature, in a locked cup-

board in my dressing-room, out of the reach of my wife and my daughters. As to their power, the fierce and morbid inspiration of the man's mind, there could be no doubt. I took off my hat to them. In private.

Then one day, at the club, Mr. Baptist began to talk to me about Portal's personal life. His novel, it appeared, had not sold well. His poems, too, were unacceptable to most journals, for the reasons that I've already indicated. He was so pressed for money that he was unable to live the kind of London life which is supposed to nourish literary excellence. Frankly, I do not agree with this. The whole history of literature shows us that poverty, distress and domestic unhappiness are almost essential to the production of all the greatest art; but, in this case, the details were so pathetic that, partly out of curiosity, and partly out of a genuine desire to help a man whom the future might prove to be immortal, I consented to motor down to Essex with Baptist and see his conditions for myself.

We drove there on a Saturday afternoon in early summer. It rained all the way; but Baptist, who was obviously unused to motoring, appeared to enjoy himself. With great difficulty we found Portal's house. It lay somewhere in the waste land at the back of Tilbury docks; a labourer's cottage of sordid, middle-aged brick, standing by itself on the edge of a miserable beech-wood.

Although the Portals had been established there for several years the place seemed to me abominably ill-

kept. The ornamental strip in front of it was in a tangle of neglect; the kitchen-garden behind stood clogged and rank with docks and nettles. Making allowances for the eccentricity of genius I could not but judge it as the house of an idle, slovenly man.

We left the car at the end of the lane, in order not to offend Portal's proletarian prejudices. We knocked at the door; but nobody opened to us. Inside, two people were quarrelling violently in French. Baptist eventually lifted the latch and pushed the door inward with difficulty. The wood was warped with damp.

There, on his knees, we saw Leonard Portal, scrubbing the brick floor in his shirt-sleeves with a dirty swab. On a horse-hair sofa behind him, sucking peppermints, his wife lay and gibed at him. I see I have written "his wife." Well, we will leave it at that. In any case, she was a blowsy, dark, sanguine female: a Belgian, they told me later. Even when we had entered she went on pestering him about intimate private affairs that I cannot possibly mention.

As for Portal himself, my first impression, in spite of his energetic floor-swabbing, was one of dirt. He was a man of well below middle height, with an unruly beard and a great mass of black hair that flopped over his forehead like that of a Highland steer. Through this tangle his deep violet eyes suddenly blazed at us, and particularly at his publisher, as if he wished us dead. It occurred to me then, and I have often remarked it since, that a publisher's introduction to an

author is not, as a rule, the best obtainable.

When he had finished glaring at us Portal threw his swab into the bucket. The dirty water splashed his wife, and she swore at him in a strong Belgian accent. He rose to his feet. His trousers were disgustingly stained and baggy at the knees. He wore nothing else but a pair of tennis-shoes and an old cricket-shirt.

"Well, Baptist," he said. "And what the hell do *you* want? Another pound of flesh?"

My friend, who, like most publishers, happens to be a Jew, took the insult handsomely.

"My dear Portal," he said, "I have ventured to bring Mr. Barlow, a great admirer of yours, to make your acquaintance."

This was hardly correct. I had driven Baptist down in my private Daimler. But no matter. The word "admirer" seemed to soften Portal a little. He looked me up and down.

"Give us a cigarette," he said. He sniffed at my gold cigarette case, but took five. He lit one, stuck another behind his ear, and went on talking in his high, Welsh sing-song.

"An admirer, eh? Well, what do you admire?"

I mentioned the title of his first novel. The woman on the sofa, who, till this moment had contented herself with an insolent stare, laughed hoarsely.

"There you are, Portal! That's your admirer. You go on writing sentimental pap of that kind and they'll come in shoals. Verhaeren and water! That's what you

can do best. I've told you before, you've no blood in your body."

At this all the blood that *was* in his body seemed to go to his head. His eyes were suffused like those of an angry bull; he tossed his head as if there were horns on it. His pugnacious mouth smiled murder. There she lay, sanguine, prepotent, twice his size. I thought he would fly at her, there and then. Luckily Baptist came to the rescue.

"My dear Hélène," he said smoothly, "for God's sake leave Portal alone. His work's quite strong enough for me, and a bit too strong for most people. Give the poor fellow a chance."

Portal glared angrily from one to the other. He couldn't bear to be told that he was weak or anæmic; it incensed him equally to hear that his work was too strong. He hated all of us. Then suddenly the sense of humour that so rarely appeared in his work got the better of him.

"Take a pew," he said, "and I'll get you a cup of tea."

His wife never moved to help him. He went slinking out into a dreadful dank scullery. We heard him whistling like a boy and clattering tea-cups, and then the roar of a Primus-stove. Evidently he took it for granted that it was his business to do all the housework. When I looked at that great, lazy, hulking woman, I felt sorry for him. The publisher sat down by her side.

"Well, Hélène," he said, "how goes it?"

"Writing as usual," she said. "Trust me to keep him at it. We owe six months' rent. Next week we look like being turned out."

"But he *is* writing?" said Baptist.

"That's all *you* care about!" she snarled. "Yes. He's writing jolly well—but if he doesn't finish this novel before we're chucked out he'll never finish it at all. There'll be the devil to pay."

"Why can't you leave him alone?" said Baptist.

"He writes best when he's in a rage. Besides, he's my man, not yours. You mind your own business."

Then Portal came in with the tea-tray. It was surprising to see the change in him. Really the man was loveable; just like a schoolboy, making little childish jokes. I couldn't imagine how this innocent, jovial creature could have written the dark, terrible pages of *The Firebird*, or those anguished poems in *Contests*. He ladled condensed milk with a pewter spoon out of a tin on which the stuff had congealed like pallid glue. The tea was an acrid, black infusion. I only swallowed it out of politeness. He began to talk of his childhood in the slums of Swansea. Then, suddenly he turned on Baptist.

"I want some money," he said.

"Quite impossible, my dear fellow," said Baptist, "the royalty accounts aren't made up till the end of June. Payment in September, and precious little, I must warn you. Why don't you get on with your book?"

"Curse you for a damned robber!" said Portal, red

with anger. "Did you get my last letter?"

"Yes. I've kept it. A fine piece of invective."

"When you're dead he'll sell it, Portal," Hélène broke in. "You're a fool to write to him."

"Shut your mouth you ——!" Portal shouted. "Who's going to pay the rent?" he went on. "That's what I want to know. I can't finish my novel in a ditch."

Baptist only smiled.

Then I had an idea. It happens that since we have given up horses, the second coachman's cottage at my house in Surrey has remained vacant. It's a charming little house, quite detached from the stables, designed by Voysey. At that moment I felt so genuinely distressed that I offered it to them out of hand.

"So that's what you've come down for," said Portal suspiciously. "I see. You want me to accept your dirty charity! No, sir. I'll see you damned first. I'll finish my novel in a hedge, in a barn, in a workhouse!"

He flew at me like this, using all sorts of words of an unprintable violence, and Hélène egged him on with bitter smiles. At last he calmed down.

"If you like," he said, "and if it suits me—that mind you, is the principal thing—I'll rent it from you. What do you want for it?"

I mentioned some figure that I knew to be ridiculously low. Just to humour him.

"Do you take me for a best-seller?" he scoffed. "Still"—with a gesture of magnificence—"I won't consider money. I'll take it. When can we move in?"

I told him that I should have to consult my wife.

"Oh, it's *her* house, is it?" he scoffed. "Well, if we can't go into it to-morrow it's no good."

Determined to stretch the point I promised to wire him as soon as we could decide. "Now I'm going to write," he said abruptly. Rather as if he were conferring a favour on us as he bade us good-bye. As for his wife, she never even rose from the sofa.

On the drive back to town I told Baptist how much I disliked her. "How can a writer do good work with a woman like that in the house?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I can't think why he sticks to her," he said. "She uses him like a slave; she makes him do all the dirty work; she scoffs at his writing, his appearance, his physical weakness."

"He looks to me like a sick man," I said.

"And no doubt he is one. It's the price of genius. I don't suppose he'll live long; but by the time he dies he'll have left a monument of inspired writing that will outlast the fame of any living novelist."

"You really think that?" I said, for I, much as I dislike Baptist personally, respected Baptist's judgment.

"I'd stake my last penny on it," he said.

Well, this and the natural compassion I felt toward this fragile, fierce, harassed creature, quite determined me to put the second coachman's cottage at the couple's disposal. My wife, I am bound to confess, opposed the idea. It seemed she had read the books in my dressing-room, and that made her naturally apprehensive for our

daughters; but my own description of Portal reassured her. We decided, in any case, to sleep on it, and postponed our decision till next evening.

But when I got back to Dorking on the following night there was no question to decide. The Portals were already in possession of the premises. What is more, Portal himself, who could be extraordinarily charming on occasion in his own pathetic way, had been up to our house—the mansion, as the villagers call it—and complained to my wife that the cottage was inadequately furnished. She, out of the kindness of her heart, had let him carry away some of our choicest linen and several *objets d'art* that took his fancy. I mention this to make it quite clear how handsomely he was received.

After dinner I went down to the cottage to see for myself how things were going. Hélène met me at the door and turned me back.

"For God's sake, be quiet," she said. "Portal's started already. He's in the middle of a chapter."

I crept away, almost guiltily, from my own door. I told my wife what had happened. Our natural resentment was assuaged by the feeling that great and significant work was already being done at our expense.

For week after week Portal kept on writing. We sent him in milk and vegetables and other delicacies from the house. We expected no thanks. Certainly we never received any. We used to steal up to the cottage with our gifts as softly as sensitive people might approach a sitting thrush.

In that cottage, and on those delicacies, both provided by me, the last two-thirds of *The Swamp* were written. I hope that this fact will be remembered when Portal's abominable slanders are forgotten. The book was finished if I remember rightly, on the seventeenth of September. That night was memorable for other reasons.

In the middle of it I was awakened by a terrible hammering on the front door. The butler slept undisturbed. I went down myself in my dressing-gown to open it. Hélène Portal darted in and slammed it to behind her. She wore nothing but a night-dress. The sight of that big dark woman under these conditions was most embarrassing. Luckily it was a warm night; and she was too terrified to feel the unsuitability of her attire.

"Bolt the door, bolt it!" she cried. She was quite beside herself. "He's after me!"

"Who's after you?" I asked calmly. I thought the woman was mad. "Where's Portal?" I said.

"I tell you he's after me with a knife!" she gasped. "He's finished his book!"

Then I heard Portal's voice outside. He was shouting at his wife, and at me, his benefactor, with such obscenity that I hoped to goodness the girls were asleep. I argued with him. He wouldn't listen. He wanted Mrs. Portal's blood. This time she had driven him too far; he was determined to make an end of it; to "do her in," if I may use his own words. She, poor thing,

was already stretched out on the sofa in the hall-lounge. She had a passion for sofas, that woman. When I had succeeded in inducing Portal to return to the cottage I covered her large body with rugs and cushions and left her to sleep there. The butler found her in the morning. I considered it quite useless to explain to him.

Of course no respectable man could allow things to go on like that. A country gentleman has, after all, a reputation to think of; so I phoned up my office in the City to tell them that I was not coming in that morning, and went down to interview Héléne at the cottage.

She received me as if nothing had happened, rather, indeed, as if I were an intruder. Remember: for four months I had been keeping them and had not as yet received one halfpenny of rent. Portal, it seemed, had left his completed manuscript on the table and shut himself up in the bedroom. She asked me, at once, if I'd be so kind as to have the manuscript typed. I promised her I'd do this. It seemed she had not even the money for postage. Then she began to talk of Portal's health.

"I'm sure there's something radically wrong with him," she said.

"That seems obvious," I answered, "since he pursues you with a knife at midnight."

"Oh, that's nothing," she said. "He's always like that at the end of a book. He has to let off steam. Unfortunately I had fallen asleep and wasn't prepared for him. No," she went on, "the thing that I'm worrying about is his loss of appetite and his awful thinness."

"At any rate *we're* not responsible for that," I reminded her; but she disregarded my hint.

"He must have lost two stone during the last month," she said. "He's so constantly complaining of pain, too."

She spoke so seriously and so affectionately of this man who but for myself and Providence would have taken her life, that I couldn't help feeling sympathetic toward her. In the end I promised to wire for a friend of mine, a surgeon in Wimpole Street. That evening he arrived and we went down to the cottage together.

"I don't think he'll consent to see you; he's still locked in," Mrs. Portal told us.

I protested. "This gentleman has come down all the way from London for that purpose."

She knew his name; as indeed she should have done, for his reputation was European and his fees are enormous. As a matter of fact Portal had tired himself out and gone to sleep with the door unlocked. We entered the room together.

It was a curious sight, this man of genius lying prostrate after the birth of a masterpiece. He lay there with a contented smile on those bitter lips of his, with one arm thrown over his shaggy head, like a sleeping child. He had thrown off the bed-clothes and it was pathetic to see the emaciation, the livid transparency of his body. He looked so mild that you couldn't have believed he would kill a fly. My friend the surgeon gave him a gentle poke. He opened his eyes and stared at us mildly.

"Hello," he said, "what's all this?"

There wasn't a trace of the old, bitter savagery in his voice; he was as gentle as a lamb. Then he smiled at me.

"I say, Barlow. You know it's finished?"

"Yes," I said. Hélène told me."

"Get it typed at once."

I took the order without comment. Then the surgeon began to talk to him. Portal admitted at once that he was ill, that he'd been ill for weeks. He confirmed the loss of appetite that his wife had spoken of. He spoke of attacks of pain in the pit of the stomach that woke him after his first sleep, and various other intimate things that I need not mention. He seemed to take to the surgeon at once and welcome his suggestions. My friend examined him carefully. Once more I couldn't help wondering at the white frailness of the body in which that intense flame burned. When Portal lay stripped there seemed to be nothing of him but his mop of hair, his eyes, his mouth. His body resembled an ivory crucifix.

"Well, well, Mr. Portal," the surgeon said at last, "there's no doubt whatever as to the nature of your trouble. You've suffered from chronic appendicitis for years. At present it's in a sub-acute stage; I think you're just through with a minor attack; but if you want to live I strongly advise you to have it seen to."

"Operation?" said Portal.

"Yes."

"Who's going to pay for it?"

He looked at me. What could I say? It was: in for a penny, in for two hundred pounds.

"Don't worry your head about that," I said. "I'll undertake it myself."

"More of your damned charity," said Portal. Not one word of thanks. "I distrust all surgeons," he went on. "I regard them as superstitious survivals, and I hate 'em. Still, I know I've got a temperature at the present moment. And I've finished the damn book. Don't forget that typescript, Barlow! I suppose you can do what you like with me."

Mrs. Portal met us below. She seemed surprised that he hadn't eaten us.

"Yes, he's like that sometimes the day after," she said. "But you just wait!"

She seemed more frightened of the operation than Portal himself; but my friend explained to her, with admirable clearness, that this appendix trouble had probably been poisoning Portal's system for the last ten years, through the whole of his literary life.

"I expect you've found him difficult occasionally," he said. "Well, that's natural enough. *Irritabile genus*. I know the nature of your husband's books. But when you have added to his normal irritation the factor of constant septic absorption from a closed focus of infection, you can account for much more. I can almost assure you," he went on, "that when your husband's appendix has been removed he'll be a new man. It will add a hundred per cent to his physical and mental

efficiency. If he's produced masterpieces, as I'm told, in his present condition, I think I can guarantee you that his literary power will gain in the same degree. The slightly morbid strain that critics have noticed in his work will disappear. Also he'll be easier to live with."

"I don't know if I shall be able to adapt myself to that," said Mrs. Portal pathetically.

Ten days later the operation was performed. In our own house. To be exact, in Mrs. Barlow's bedroom, which had the most suitable light. I may as well admit that I half suggested that Baptist should share some of the expense; but, whatever may be said to the contrary, the fact is that he refused to consider it until he knew for certain that Portal would recover. It is true also that my friend the surgeon lowered his fee for the occasion, as an acknowledgment of Portal's literary achievements. But that is a private matter; and I can safely say that the affair, from first to last, ran me in to more money than all Portal's writings had earned up to that date.

My wife was indefatigable. Her true womanliness made her forget and forgive all the slights that Mrs. Portal had put on her. We allowed that woman to eat and sleep in our house; she took her meals with the two nurses from Fitzroy Square. Most of the time she spent on the sofa in our drawing-room. I myself sat with her through the anxious period when Portal was actually on the table. I tried to comfort and sustain her with the prospect of his certain recovery.

In less than an hour the surgeon came down to tell us what he had found. "Completely successful," he said. "I couldn't have made a more exact diagnosis. The appendix was in a dreadful condition—six inches long and adherent."

I won't enlarge on these surgical details. It is enough to say that what he found confirmed the fact that this thing had been poisoning Portal's body and brain for years. "I congratulate you, Barlow," he said, "on having performed a service to culture and humanity."

I left Mrs. Portal in tears beside her husband's bed. In his first articulate words he called her by name, and asked her to kiss him. It seemed to me a good omen.

I will pass over Portal's convalescence. It was normal. The nurses told me that they had never known a more docile patient. From the moment of his recovery he scarcely ever spoke a harsh word to his wife. She herself could hardly credit the change in him; she spoke of it almost bitterly, as if she were not wholly pleased. That, of course, was her own affair.

As for myself, as soon as Portal was sufficiently well to be moved, I sent them, at my own expense, into Devonshire. They never wrote to thank me: they did not even answer my letters of enquiry. What is more, according to my wife, they left the second coachman's cottage in a state of filth unparalleled in her house-keeping experience.

The rest of the story is known only too well. It has formed the basis of violent attacks on myself and Mrs.

Barlow by the Portals themselves and every petty journalist with whom they come in contact. At the present time, Baptist tells me, Portal is living in rude, robust health. He is farming in Wiltshire, and is likely to go on living healthily into an extreme old age. He has never written another word. And I, if you please, am accused of being the destroyer of his genius!

It is an injustice, a cruel injustice that I have every right to resent. In absolute good faith I rescued this man and his so-called wife from depths of degradation. I housed them; I fed them; lately I have discovered that I clothed them. I paid for the typing of that acknowledged masterpiece *The Swamp*. When he lay at the door of death I furnished him with the highest medical skill. And now that man, whose life I sustained and saved, persistently holds me up to scorn and contumely. One thing at least it has taught me: never in the future will I, or Mrs. Barlow, by words, or food, or money, raise one finger in the aid of suffering genius.

Postscript.

The other day I wrote to my friend the surgeon for his private opinion on the Portal case. Needless to say, he agrees with me on the shameful way in which my generosity was received. On the subject of Portal's present literary sterility his reply was most enlightening. "*The Pearl and the Oyster*," he writes. "That

fibrous appendix was the irritating foreign body round which the pearls of Portal's genius were deposited. We removed it, as was our duty, in perfect good faith, and now Leonard Portal is nothing but an oyster."

THE END

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